

SUBMISSION TO LOCAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT

Establishing Community Arts Centres as Essential Social Infrastructure

A Case for Government-Funded, Professionally-Run Arts and Culture Centres for Youth and Community in Australian Towns and Cities

Submitted to:

Local Government Council | State Government Department of Arts, Culture & Community

Prepared by:

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I am a local artist, mother, and youth mentor based in the Byron Shire, and I am writing to advocate for Community Arts Centres to be recognised and funded as essential social infrastructure — alongside schools, libraries, youth centres, community centres, and sports fields.

This is not an abstract policy proposal. It is a response to what I am watching happen in my own community right now.

Create Art Studio in Mullumbimby — a beloved educational art space supporting young people's creativity and wellbeing — will soon be forced to close its doors due to unaffordable rent. Story Keeper's Theatre, a youth theatre group that gives young people in our region a stage, a voice, and a sense of belonging, is currently struggling to find any affordable venue for rehearsals or productions and is at serious risk of folding. These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a broader crisis in which the rising cost of living and rapid gentrification are quietly dismantling the cultural foundations of towns like ours.

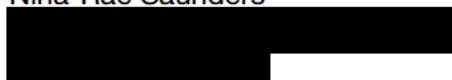
Byron Shire is a place people moved to — and invested in — because of its creative spirit, its arts scene, its makers and performers and storytellers. That spirit does not sustain itself. It requires space. And space, right now, is being priced beyond reach.

We would never accept a town without a library, a sports field, or a youth centre. We fund those things because we understand that communities need infrastructure to thrive — not just roads and buildings, but places where people can gather, learn, create, and belong. Artists and creative practitioners provide exactly that kind of infrastructure, and yet we leave them entirely to the mercy of a commercial property market that has no interest in culture.

The submission that follows makes the case for government to change this — to plan for Community Arts Centres, fund them properly, staff them with professionals, and protect them in legislation. I ask that you read it with the same seriousness you would bring to a submission about a school, a pool, or a community hall. Because that is exactly what this is about.

The arts are not a luxury. In towns like ours, they are the reason people came — and the reason, if we are not careful, that the soul of our community will not survive the decade.

Nina-Rae Saunders



Executive Summary

This submission calls on local and state government to formally recognise Community Arts Centres as essential public social infrastructure — placing them alongside schools, libraries, youth centres, and community centres in town planning policy, funding frameworks, and capital works programs.

We propose a model of government-funded, professionally-operated Community Arts Centres that provide:

- Dedicated youth arts studio space — offering structured creative education and open-access creative time for young people
- A professional theatre and performance space available to community groups and youth programs
- Subsidised studio allotments for adult artists, musicians, and performers at genuinely affordable rents
- Shared facilities for art, music, theatre, dance, and other creative disciplines
- Cultural programming anchored in the local community and its identity

In gentrified towns and cities across Australia, artists and creative practitioners have been priced out of the communities they helped make vibrant. The ripple effects — reduced cultural activity, weakened social cohesion, declining youth engagement — are felt across the entire community. This proposal offers a direct, proven, and cost-effective solution.

A S K	<i>Fund, legislate, and mandate Community Arts Centres as part of standard social infrastructure in all new and existing town planning frameworks, with dedicated capital and recurrent government funding.</i>
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1. The Problem: Cultural Displacement and Its Consequences

1.1 Artists Are Being Priced Out of Australian Communities

Over the past two decades, rapid gentrification has transformed many Australian towns and inner-city suburbs. While this has brought investment and development, it has simultaneously displaced the artists, performers, musicians, and creative communities whose presence made these places culturally rich and desirable in the first place.

Rising rents have made studio space, rehearsal rooms, and workshop facilities unaffordable for individual artists and small creative organisations. Where dedicated arts spaces once existed organically — in industrial areas, community halls, and affordable commercial strips — they have been replaced by luxury apartments, boutique retail, and high-end hospitality.

The result is a cultural vacuum: towns that look prosperous but feel hollow, where community members — especially young people — have nowhere to make, experience, or connect through art and culture.

1.2 Youth Are Left Without Creative Infrastructure

Young people are among the most acutely affected. Research consistently shows that access to arts and creative programs in adolescence is strongly correlated with improved mental health outcomes, reduced antisocial behaviour, higher school engagement, and stronger community belonging.

Yet most towns and cities that have invested in passive youth infrastructure — skate parks, playgrounds, sports fields — have failed to invest equivalently in active creative space for young people. A young person who wants to learn ceramics, rehearse a play, record music, or paint large-scale works has nowhere to go unless their family can afford private lessons or courses.

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We fund youth sports infrastructure as a matter of course. We fund youth libraries. We must fund youth arts and creative infrastructure with the same intent and permanence.

1.3 The Community Pays the Hidden Cost

When arts and culture disappear from a community, the costs are distributed widely but invisibly. Social isolation increases. Local identity weakens. Intergenerational connection diminishes. The community loses a shared vocabulary for expressing who it is and what it values.

These are not soft or abstract concerns. They are measurable. Communities with strong arts infrastructure consistently outperform comparable communities on indicators of social cohesion, mental health, economic resilience, and civic participation.

2. The Evidence: Why Arts Infrastructure Works

2.1 Arts and Cultural Participation — By the Numbers

EVIDENCE	FINDING
3x	Young people who regularly participate in arts programs are three times more likely to complete secondary school and pursue further education (Deloitte Access Economics, The Case for the Arts,

67%	Australians aged 15–24 who participated in arts and creative activities reported improved mental health and sense of belonging (Australia Council for the Arts, 2022)
\$2.70	Every \$1 invested in community arts programs returns an estimated \$2.70 in social and economic benefit through reduced health costs, increased employment, and community resilience (Creative Australia, 2023)
42%	Young people in communities with accessible arts facilities are 42% less likely to report persistent feelings of social isolation (Relationships Australia, 2021)
\$111B	Australia's creative industries contribute over \$111 billion annually to GDP — a sector that depends on nurturing creative practitioners from the ground up (DCCEEW Cultural Policy Report, 2023)

2.2 International Best Practice

Across the United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, and the Netherlands, government-funded community arts centres are treated as non-negotiable infrastructure. The UK's Creative People and Places program, funded by Arts Council England, has demonstrated measurable improvements in wellbeing, social trust, and economic outcomes in areas where community arts centres were established. Finland's model of integrating youth arts studios into every municipality has been cited by the OECD as a key contributor to that country's exceptional educational and social outcomes.

Australia has the evidence, the policy frameworks, and the community need to implement a comparable model. What is currently missing is the political will to treat arts infrastructure with the same seriousness as sporting or educational infrastructure.

3. The Proposal: Community Arts Centres as Social Infrastructure

3.1 What We Are Proposing

We propose that government at both local and state levels commit to establishing Community Arts Centres (CACs) as a standard component of social infrastructure planning. Every community of sufficient size should have access to a professionally run, government-funded CAC, equivalent in status, funding model, and planning mandate to a public library or community centre.

3.2 The Model: What a Community Arts Centre Looks Like

YOUTH ARTS STUDIO SPACE

Dedicated, professionally equipped studio space for young people aged 8–25. This space would offer:

- Open-access creative hours — free or heavily subsidised, no appointment needed
- Structured programs in visual art, ceramics, printmaking, digital art, photography, music, and theatre
- After-school and school-holiday programs run by professional arts educators
- Mentorship linking young people with working professional artists
- Safe, welcoming, non-judgmental space that is genuinely youth-led in its programming ethos

THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE SPACE

A flexible, professionally equipped performance space available to community groups, schools, youth companies, and local theatre makers. This space would include:

- A flexible black-box or small-to-medium format theatre (80–200 seats)
- Professional lighting, sound, and staging infrastructure
- Affordable hire rates for community groups and subsidised or free access for youth productions
- Dedicated rehearsal rooms available for booking
- A venue for community celebration, cultural events, and civic ceremony

ADULT ARTIST STUDIO ALLOTMENTS

Subsidised studio spaces for rent by individual artists, musicians, craftspeople, and creative practitioners. These allotments would be:

- Offered at rents well below commercial market rates — genuinely affordable for working artists
- Allocated through a transparent application process prioritising local practitioners
- Structured to encourage community engagement — artists in residence who contribute to youth programs or open studio events
- Available across a range of disciplines: visual art, music, ceramics, textiles, photography, writing, and more
- A mechanism for retaining creative talent in communities at risk of cultural displacement

SHARED FACILITIES AND PROGRAMMING

- Communal workshop space with specialist equipment (kilns, printing presses, darkrooms, recording facilities)
- Exhibition and gallery space to showcase community and youth work
- Regular public programming: artist talks, open studios, community exhibitions, cultural festivals
- Partnerships with local schools, TAFEs, and universities for creative education pathways
- A café or social hub to activate the space and build community ownership

4. Governance, Operations, and Funding

4.1 Professional Management

Community Arts Centres must be run by qualified arts administrators and creative professionals — not managed as an afterthought within existing council bureaucracies. Effective CACs require:

- A Centre Director with demonstrated experience in arts administration and community engagement
- Professional arts educators with relevant qualifications and industry experience
- A Board or Advisory Committee that includes artists, young people, community members, and government representatives
- Clear key performance indicators focused on community access, youth participation, and cultural output — not purely financial metrics

4.2 Funding Model

We propose a co-funded model drawing on multiple government sources, consistent with how libraries, leisure centres, and community halls are funded:

FUNDING SOURCE	PURPOSE	PRECEDENT
State Government	Capital works, major equipment, recurrent operating subsidy	State libraries, gallery networks, community centre grants
Local Council	Land, building maintenance, operational co-contribution	Community centres, leisure centres, libraries
Federal Government	Infrastructure and community grants via	National cultural policy (Revive, 2023)
Earned Revenue	Studio rents, venue hire, café, ticketed events,	Standard income-generation model for arts organisations

4.3 Town Planning Integration

We call for amendments to state planning legislation and local planning schemes to:

- Include Community Arts Centres as a defined land use category in planning frameworks
- Require their consideration — alongside schools, libraries, and community centres — in population growth and development approval processes
- Enable developer contributions (Section 7.11 or equivalent) to fund arts infrastructure in high-growth areas
- Protect existing arts-zoned land from conversion to residential or commercial use without community impact assessment

5. The Case for Youth: Creative Space as Essential Service

A young person who has access to a rehearsal room, a pottery wheel, a recording studio, or a painting workshop has something profound: a place where they can fail safely, express freely, and build identity through making. This is not a luxury. For many young people — particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those experiencing mental health challenges, or those who do not fit neatly into the academic or sporting molds our institutions tend to privilege — arts access is a lifeline.

The current landscape offers youth sport and recreation infrastructure as standard. We do not ask young people to justify their access to an oval or a swimming pool. We recognise, correctly, that physical activity is foundational to wellbeing. We must apply the same logic to creative practice. The research is unambiguous: access to arts and culture in adolescence is equally foundational, and its absence is equally costly.

W H Y I T M A T E

Creative participation builds self-confidence, emotional literacy, collaboration skills, and resilience. These are not supplementary life skills — they are core ones. A Community Arts Centre is not a nice-to-have for youth. It is infrastructure for human development.

Youth-specific features of our proposed model include:

- Free or gold coin donation access to open studio time for under-18s
- No audition or selection process — the space is for all young people, not only the talented or trained
- Youth Advisory Committees to give young people genuine agency over programming and culture
- School holiday intensive programs in partnership with local schools and youth services
- Pathways to vocational training and employment in the creative industries
- Drop-in access during after-school hours when young people most need structured, safe, engaging spaces

6. Community, Culture, and Cohesion

Culture is how communities know themselves. It is the stories told on a local stage, the murals on a street corner, the music played at a community gathering, the artworks made by children hung in a foyer. When communities lose their cultural infrastructure, they lose part of their identity — and with it, a degree of social cohesion that no amount of urban design or development can replace.

Gentrification, while often bringing economic investment, has a well-documented tendency to erase the cultural character that made an area desirable in the first place. The artists, performers, and makers who shaped a neighbourhood's identity are displaced by the very prosperity they helped create. Government has a responsibility to intervene in this cycle — to ensure that cultural vitality is not a casualty of economic growth.

A Community Arts Centre, anchored in its local community and run by people who understand and are accountable to that community, can:

- Serve as a gathering place that crosses social, economic, and generational divides
- Provide a platform for First Nations arts and cultural expression
- Celebrate local cultural diversity and give new communities a place to share their cultural heritage
- Build intergenerational connection through collaborative creative projects
- Anchor community identity during periods of rapid demographic or economic change
- Foster local creative economies that keep talent in the region and attract cultural tourism

C O H E S I O

In communities with strong arts infrastructure, people are more likely to know their neighbours, participate in civic life, volunteer, and report a sense of pride in where they live. Arts centres are community-building machines.

7. What We Are Asking Government to Do

7.1 Immediate Actions

- Commission a state-wide audit of community arts infrastructure gaps, with particular attention to gentrified and rapidly changing communities
- Establish a dedicated Community Arts Centres funding stream within state arts and community development budgets
- Develop a minimum standards framework for Community Arts Centres, including space requirements, professional staffing, youth programming, and affordable studio allotments
- Initiate a pilot program funding three to five Community Arts Centres in identified high-need communities within the current or next budget cycle

7.2 Medium-Term Policy Actions

- Amend state planning legislation to include Community Arts Centres as a defined infrastructure category
- Require local councils to include arts infrastructure needs assessments in their Community Strategic Plans and Local Strategic Planning Statements
- Create a joint federal-state-local funding compact for arts infrastructure, modelled on the existing compact for sporting infrastructure
- Establish a National Community Arts Centres Advisory Body to develop best practice guidelines, share learnings, and advocate for ongoing funding

7.3 Structural Change

- Formally recognise in policy that arts and cultural infrastructure is social infrastructure — not a discretionary or supplementary service
- Require that arts infrastructure be considered in all major development approvals and growth-area planning
- Protect existing arts spaces through planning controls that prevent conversion or redevelopment without assessment of cultural impact

8. Conclusion

We do not ask whether communities deserve libraries. We do not debate whether young people deserve access to public sporting grounds. We do not question whether community halls serve a social purpose. These are settled questions, embedded in our planning systems and our public budgets because we have recognised, as a society, that they are foundational to community wellbeing.

It is time to settle the same question about arts and cultural infrastructure. The evidence is clear. The need is acute. The model is proven. What remains is a political choice: will we invest in the cultural life of our communities with the same commitment we extend to their physical and sporting life?

We urge this government to make that choice — to establish Community Arts Centres as essential social infrastructure, to fund them properly, to staff them professionally, to protect them in planning law, and to ensure that every Australian community, regardless of geography or economic circumstance, has a place where creativity can flourish.

The arts are not a luxury. They are how communities live, connect, grieve, celebrate, and make meaning together. Fund the infrastructure that makes this possible.

Submission prepared by:

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Appendix A: Key References and Resources

The following reports, policy documents, and research papers provide evidentiary support for the claims and recommendations in this submission:

- Creative Australia / Australia Council for the Arts — Revive: A Place for Every Story (National Cultural Policy, 2023)
- Deloitte Access Economics — The Case for the Arts: Return on Investment in the Arts (2023)
- Australia Council for the Arts — Arts Nation: An Overview of Australian Arts (2022)
- Relationships Australia — Community Wellbeing and Social Connection Report (2021)
- OECD — Culture and Local Development: Maximising the Impact (2020)
- Creative People and Places, Arts Council England — Program Evaluation Reports (2013–2023)
- DCCEEW — National Cultural Data Infrastructure Roadmap (2023)
- Throsby, D. & Zednik, A. — Do You Really Expect to Get Paid? An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia (2010, updated 2022)
- Municipal Association of Victoria — Arts and Culture in Local Government: A Framework for Investment (2021)
- Local Government NSW — Culture and Creativity Policy Framework (2022)

Appendix B: Summary of Recommendations

For ease of reference, the following summarises all recommendations made in this submission:

Planning and Legislation

- Define Community Arts Centres as a formal land use category in state planning legislation
- Require consideration of arts infrastructure in all Community Strategic Plans and Local Strategic Planning Statements
- Introduce planning controls to protect existing arts-zoned land and spaces from conversion
- Enable developer contributions to fund arts infrastructure in high-growth areas

Funding

- Establish a dedicated recurrent state government funding stream for Community Arts Centres
- Initiate a pilot program of three to five CACs in identified high-need communities
- Develop a federal-state-local funding compact for arts infrastructure

- Include capital funding for Community Arts Centres in infrastructure investment frameworks

Standards and Governance

- Develop a minimum standards framework covering space, staffing, youth programming, and studio allotments
- Require professional arts administration leadership for all funded CACs
- Mandate Youth Advisory Committees in all CACs receiving government funding
- Establish a National Community Arts Centres Advisory Body

Policy Recognition

- Formally recognise arts and cultural infrastructure as social infrastructure in policy and budget documents
- Include Community Arts Centres in social infrastructure plans alongside schools, libraries, and community centres
- Commission a state-wide audit of community arts infrastructure gaps as a first step