

## National Cultural Policy Consultation – June 2026

### Submission from Canberra Repertory Society

Founded in 1932, Canberra Repertory Society (Canberra REP) is one of Australia's oldest theatre companies and a longstanding cultural institution in the nation's capital, mounting more than 550 productions across over 90 years. REP produces six major shows each year at the Canberra Repertory Theatre (formerly Theatre 3), a 188-seat venue in the heart of the city.

Community theatre plays a quiet but powerful role in strengthening social cohesion. At a time when prejudice is increasingly visible in public life, organisations such as REP provide something vital: a shared civic space where people of different backgrounds work together toward a common purpose. In rehearsal rooms, workshops and audiences, community theatre educates and builds mutual understanding and respect between creative participants and with audiences. It allows people to encounter stories and perspectives other than their own.

REP's contribution to the region's cultural ecosystem extends beyond its stage. Supported by around 125 active volunteers, it has served as a training ground for a host of career pathways. Volunteers gain practical skills, confidence and social connection, and many move into employment in creative industries and beyond. REP's role as a talent incubator is a significant, often overlooked, contribution to the Territory's cultural landscape.

Despite this contribution, groups such as REP face significant challenges. Audience numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and cost-of-living pressures are reducing discretionary spending on live performance. Production costs — rights, materials, insurance, technical equipment — continue to rise. Volunteer capacity is under strain as people juggle work, caring responsibilities and the pressures of modern life. These challenges are structural and shared across the community arts sector.

REP's central marketing challenge is not audience satisfaction, but audience awareness. Many Canberrans who would benefit from its high-quality, affordable productions do not know it exists. REP is moving from ad hoc promotion to a more disciplined, year-round approach that strengthens digital capability while mobilising its volunteer community as an amplification network.

These sector-wide pressures are intensified by REP's responsibility for maintaining the Canberra Repertory Theatre building, owned by the ACT Government.

REP moved into the venue in the early 1970s under a long-term lease that reflected the building's intended role as a shared community cultural asset, including making the theatre available to other groups for 12 weeks each year.

The original Commonwealth arrangement anticipated ongoing government support for maintenance and upkeep. That support ended in 2016 when the ACT Government withdrew venue-maintenance funding from its arts facilities inventory and offered continued support only if REP surrendered its secure long-term lease for a five-year lease subject to competitive re-tendering. REP declined in order to secure its future and has since carried the full burden of maintenance, compliance and capital upgrades to the building.

The building is not heritage-listed, but it is ageing and increasingly costly to maintain. REP now carries responsibilities that were never intended to sit solely with a community theatre company.

While the venue is accessible for audiences, backstage and performance areas require investment to meet contemporary accessibility standards. These upgrades are essential if REP is to play its part in equitable creative participation and align with the National Cultural Policy's commitment to inclusion.

## Recommendations

To support REP and organisations like it, we recommend the National Cultural Policy:

1. **Recognise community arts organisations as a foundational layer of Australia's cultural ecosystem.** Community theatre is one of the most accessible and democratic forms of cultural participation. It educates, fosters talent development, strengthens social cohesion and provides pathways into professional practice.
2. **Establish dedicated funding streams for community and amateur arts,** including to support efforts to achieve sustainability including strengthening **digital capability**, enabling community theatres to modernise marketing, ticketing and production technologies to shore up financial sustainability.
3. **Invest in community-owned cultural infrastructure,** ensuring venues like Canberra Repertory Theatre remain safe, accessible and fit for purpose, while ensuring equitable participation for artists with disability.

4. **Support audience development initiatives** including national campaigns promoting local arts participation and partnerships with schools, tertiary institutions and community groups.

Groups like REP build mutual understanding and respect. Some may consider supporting them to be matter for local government, but a focus on the opportunity they represent would ensure the National Cultural Policy contributes to strengthening Australia's social fabric.

Council  
Canberra Repertory Society

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