

Towards a new National Cultural Policy

Australian Creative Histories and Futures (ACHF) submission

May 2026

Australian Creative Histories and Futures (ACHF) is a four-year national research infrastructure initiative (2024-2028) to improve Australia's cultural data capabilities.

ACHF is led by UNSW with partners from Flinders University, Creative Australia and ACMI. ACHF received investment from the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC). The ARDC is funded by the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS).

As we reach the half-way point of this four-year project to make Australian cultural data more FAIR (Findable Accessible Interoperable Reusable), the ACHF team has accrued substantial knowledge of the sector's data holdings, systems and capabilities – and how co-ordinated development of data infrastructure can improve the scale, speed and quality of research, evaluation and impact measurement.

We welcome the opportunity to provide insights from our work to help guide the next National Cultural Policy.

Our recommendations:

Informed by learnings from the ACHF project to date, we recommend a continued commitment to the generation of meaningful data and research in the new National Cultural Policy to support the arts and cultural sector, specifically:

- support the principles of Indigenous Data Governance in the arts and encourage the same from the wider creative sector.
- acknowledge and support ethical governance standards for those working with data about diverse communities.
- assist in securing and developing data sets of national importance.
- support efforts to develop interoperability and accessibility between government and sector data sets.
- support collaborative research between government, sector and universities such as the ACHF project in long-term and sustained ways.
- support sector capability and capacity to use, interpret and critically assess data effectively.

- strengthen support for the Cultural and Creative Statistics Working Group as a cross-government cooperative data and research forum
- continue to refine the way the Australian Bureau of Statistics collects and reports data about arts and culture to enable more accurate and accessible knowledge about the cultural workforce and participation in cultural life.
- Support and engage in research that develops new frameworks for understanding and assessing the value of arts and culture that reflect long-term social, civic, cultural and intergenerational outcomes of the public value of arts and culture.

About Australian Creative Histories and Futures

ACHF represents the first large-scale investment in research data infrastructure for the arts in Australia.

Australia's cultural history spans decades of artistic practice, public investment, and cultural participation. However, much of this data - held in databases like [AusStage](#), [Design and Art Australia Online \(DAAO\)](#), and Creative Australia - is fragmented and difficult to access. By strengthening these databases and enabling greater interoperability, ACHF will help support quality research and greater understanding about Australia's rich creative ecosystem.

Investigating how Indigenous cultural and creative data is kept and shared is a key focus of the project. Guided by the [FAIR](#) (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) and [CARE](#) (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) principles, ACHF is working to develop best practice models of Indigenous data governance for the sector.

By building digital skills and data literacy across the arts sector, ACHF will enable more informed decision-making and fostering of innovation in cultural policy and practice.

The overarching aim of the ACHF is to augment Australia's cultural data capabilities. This is being achieved by:

- Building a fuller understanding of Australian cultural production, distribution, and reception;
- Developing and enhancing integrated national technical infrastructure to analyse cultural data collections at scale;
- Rendering valuable cultural data of national significance more FAIR (Findable Accessible Interoperable Reusable) while adhering to CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) principles;
- Improving cultural researchers' digital skills and raising awareness of best practice in digital research;
- Enabling translational cultural research about the arts in the national interest;

- Enhancing Australia's reputation as an international leader in cultural data and digital infrastructure.

Introduction

High quality data and data literacy are fundamental to informing policy and telling the stories of the arts through research, evaluation and impact measurement.

The ACHF acknowledges and applauds actions in *Revive* to improve data collection. We encourage the Australian Government to extend and expand on these with a strengthened and updated commitment to data and research, informed by the learnings and opportunities outlined below.

Learnings and opportunities

1. **First Nations First:** *The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can continue to reflect First Nations priorities, strengthen recognition of cultural rights, recognise the centrality of language to culture, and support pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape.*

Investigating how Indigenous cultural and creative data is kept and shared is a key focus of ACHF. Best practice models of Indigenous Data Governance will be developed for the sector by 2028, led by the ACHF's Indigenous Research Fellow under the guidance of the ACHF's Indigenous Advisory Group.

Research undertaken by the ACHF project shows:

- a significant majority (73%) of Data Curators and Managers indicate that they handle Indigenous data and consider its 'cultural sensitivities' as well as its potential 'impact' on Community
- 21% of Data Curators and Managers are currently working with no guidelines at all

There is opportunity for the new National Cultural Policy to support the principles of Indigenous Data Governance in the arts and encourage the same from the wider sector. This would also respond to priorities articulated by First Nations communities in the [*First Nations First: What We Heard Report*](#), and expectations set out in the [NIAA Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data](#) and [Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four – Shared Access to Data and Information at an Institutional Level](#).

2. **A Place for Every Story:** *The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can continue to recognise diverse forms of cultural expression and participation, including local and place-based practice and emerging modes of expression, while responding to changing patterns of participation and supporting inclusion.*

Understanding the scope and scale of diverse forms of cultural expression and participation is critical to this pillar. CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) principles require that communities can access and control their own data as well as its descriptions within the cultural data sector. (For example, [Disability Arts History Australia](#) discusses the potential for data to create [triggers and glimmers](#) for people in the Disability Arts community).

Building on the Indigenous Data Governance work, the ACHF is investigating community governance more broadly and will develop Community Data Governance Principles.

There is opportunity for the new national Cultural Policy to acknowledge and support ethical governance standards for those working with data about diverse communities.

3. **Centrality of the Artist:** *As creative practice, technology and work patterns continue to evolve, the government is seeking views on how cultural policy can respond to changing conditions for creative work, including safer and fairer workplaces, the protection of creative rights in the digital environment and the role of arts education, creative skills and lifelong learning, and how creators are recognised across the broader economy.*

Tracking career pathways and identifying evolving barriers and enablers to training, working and making a living in the arts are critical to this pillar.

Research undertaken by the ACHF project shows:

- 80% of artists place a strong value on the role accurate data plays in ensuring public visibility of their artistic work and their contribution to Australian cultural history.
- They most commonly prioritise access for researchers and public usage (86%), followed by a desire for their career to be a part of Australian cultural history (77%) and for their contribution to be formally recorded (74%). Many value data visibility to track their own career (63%).
- 76% of artists use data for grant applications, acquittals and demonstrating impact.

By enabling greater interoperability between data sets, ACHF will help support greater research and understanding about Australia's creative ecosystem.

There is opportunity for the new national Cultural Policy to support efforts to develop interoperability between government and sector datasets to enable more timely and evidence-informed identification of workforce challenges (including insecure employment, accessibility barriers, skills shortages, regional inequities and deteriorating career sustainability across the cultural sector) at scale, as they emerge.

4. **Strong Cultural Infrastructure:** *The government is seeking views on how Australia's cultural infrastructure can remain resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose, including how existing partnerships, investment, infrastructure and systems could be used more effectively to support long-term sustainability.*

Cultural data should be recognised as significant cultural infrastructure, shaping every dimension of cultural experience and preservation. There is a great volume of data on Australia's artistic practice and cultural participation. However, much of this data has remained fragmented and difficult to access. The ACHF research has identified that some important data sets of national significance are at risk of being discontinued or lost without further investment.

Co-ordinated development of data infrastructure can improve the scale, speed and quality of research, evaluation and impact measurement – which in turn would better inform policy and decision-making.

Research undertaken by the ACHF project shows:

- 70% of data curators and managers report that their institutional strategies for long-term data management are only 'moderately' (40%) or 'not at all' (30%) robust.
- 77% of data curators and managers consider resourcing to be the primary reason they do not explore interoperability solutions.
- 84% of researchers rely on publicly available or open-access sources, with a substantial share using data collected or commissioned internally by their organisation (65%).

There is opportunity for the new national Cultural Policy to assist in securing and developing data sets of national importance and to support efforts to develop interoperability between government and sector datasets. It would also align with Government policy and requirements for making relevant data available and accessible, including the [Data and Digital Government Strategy](#) and the [Australian Government Data Governance Framework](#); as well as the Australian Government's commitment to improve data collection and reporting on disability in the [Arts and Disability Associated Plan](#).

5. **Engaging the Audience:** *The government is seeking views on how cultural policy can respond to changing audience behaviours, discovery pathways and modes of engagement, including innovation in presentation and discovery to sustain participation, as well as marketing and distribution so Australian creativity continues to inspire, include and connect.*

Audience development and diversification require skills, tools and access to rich and relevant data. By building digital capability and data literacy across the arts sector, ACHF will enable better informed decision-making, improved discoverability, stronger community engagement and international recognition, and greater innovation in cultural policy and practice. As more and more audience data becomes

inaccessible to cultural producers within the black boxes of international digital service providers, strengthened data infrastructure becomes more vital.

Research undertaken by the ACHF project shows:

- 74% of Data Curators and Managers use data to report to funders/partners and stakeholders, and in annual reports or other documents.
- 66% of Data Curators and Managers frequently use data to shape programming content and marketing/communication strategies.
- Yet, 49% of data curators and managers report no support within their teams for data management.

Strengthened data infrastructure will make audience engagement with arts and culture more visible, measurable and actionable. It will provide a clearer view for the arts and cultural sector of how Australians discover, experience and participate in cultural activity across communities, regions and platforms, as well as insights into the value and sustainability of cultural infrastructure. This supports a more effective arts sector - enabling organisations to better understand audiences and respond to changing patterns of engagement. Visibility also enables cultural policy to demonstrate impact and align with broader government priorities (such as social inclusion, education, health and wellbeing, and regional development) by showing how arts engagement is contributing to these outcomes.

There is opportunity for the new national Cultural Policy to support sector capability and capacity to use data effectively.