

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public

Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

I am writing this submission in my capacity as a professional working within Australia's Indigenous language and cultural sector. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Revive consultation and to advocate for the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages at the centre of Australia's national cultural policy.

Language is the foundation upon which culture is built. It is the medium through which knowledge is transmitted across generations, through which Country is named and understood, and through which identity is expressed and affirmed. Any national cultural policy that does not place Indigenous languages at its core is, in my view, incomplete. Revive presents a timely opportunity to correct the historical under-investment in this area and to establish a durable framework for language support, funding and legislation.

The Case for Sustained Funding

Funding for Indigenous language programs in Australia has long been fragmented, short-term and inadequate relative to need. Language centres, community-led revival programs and documentation projects routinely operate on annual or biennial grants that make long-range planning impossible. The result is a sector characterised by high expertise and high instability — one where skilled language workers are lost between funding cycles and where progress made in one period is not consolidated in the next.

Revive should recommend multi-year, indexed funding commitments for language organisations, with dedicated streams for documentation, revival, and intergenerational transmission. The 2019 First Languages Australia report 'A time to listen' identified these same structural gaps; progress since then has been insufficient. Investment in language is also investment upstream of health, education and justice outcomes — a point increasingly recognised in Closing the Gap evidence — and should be framed and resourced accordingly.

The Need for Legislative Protection

Australia remains one of the few comparable nations without national legislation recognising and protecting Indigenous language rights. Canada enacted its Indigenous Languages Act in 2019; New Zealand has long maintained statutory recognition of te reo Mori. In Australia, protections remain piecemeal, discretionary and vulnerable to shifts in government priority.

I strongly support the development of a National Indigenous Languages Act that enshrines the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their languages, establishes independent oversight of language policy, and creates a stable legislative basis for ongoing investment. Such legislation would signal to language communities, and to the international community, that Australia is serious about meeting its obligations under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the goals of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032.

Structural Support for the Sector

Beyond funding and legislation, the sector requires structural support: workforce development pathways for language workers, digital infrastructure for safe and sovereign archiving of language materials, and mechanisms that ensure communities retain ownership and control of their language data. The emergence of artificial intelligence as a tool for language processing makes this last point particularly urgent — nationa