



***Submission  
National Cultural  
Policy***

Invest in us  
so we can invest  
in them

Local Government:

Submission by:  
Country Mayors Association of NSW

[Redacted]



## Submission *National Cultural Policy*

### Introduction

The Country Mayors Association of NSW (CMA) represents 89 councils located in remote, rural and regional NSW as well as five associate members. The CMA's goal is to promote and advocate for our Member Councils and the communities they represent across a broad range of matters as well as for Local Government sector as a whole.

In operation for over 45 years, the CMA looks to create genuine, respectful and productive relationships with State and Federal Governments to empower, engage, promote and deliver positive outcomes for regional NSW.

We welcome the Government's commitment to developing a new National Cultural Policy to shape the future direction of the creative and cultural sector but are very concerned about the lack of representation from regional Australia and Local Government on the expert panels or the advisory panel.

Our Members question how the Government can develop a national policy without adequate and appropriate representation from regional Australia. There are approximately 10 million people who call remote, rural and regional Australia home, almost 3 million of them live and work in NSW.

The lack of representation from Local Government is also very concerning. Across NSW, local councils deliver, fund, host, support and promote a range of initiatives in the arts and culture sector. This includes managing more than 4,000 cultural sites throughout NSW, as well as delivering services, programs, events and local cultural planning.<sup>1</sup>

NSW has more than 350 council-run libraries that attract tens of millions of visits each year and NSW councils own and manage more than 600 museums, galleries, theatres and art centres. Councils are also involved in the arts and culture sector in the following ways:

- Hosting events;
- Installing public artwork and sculptures;
- Hiring out spaces and halls for artists;
- Providing grant funding for local creatives and their projects;
- Running residency programs at council owned facilities;

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<sup>1</sup> "A New Look at Culture: Towards the State's first Arts", Culture & Creative Industries Policy", LGNSW, 2023

- Owning and managing local libraries, theatres, museums and galleries;
- Attracting touring shows to their area, including performing in council-owned theatres;
- Being custodians of local heritage assets.

Local government investment in the creative sector delivers important economic, social, cultural and health outcomes across regional and metropolitan areas, bringing richness and meaning to individuals' lives and strengthening communities by:

- building community cohesion, wellbeing and resilience;
- creating attractive places to live, work and visit; and
- highlighting creative talent, natural assets, and unique cultures within an LGA.

It has been estimated that NSW Local Government in a single calendar year (2015-2016) invested \$520 million in arts, screen and culture.<sup>2</sup>



*Temora Shire Council's The Bundawarra Centre Cultural Precinct is home the Temora Rural Museum and Ambulance Museum and Willo's Wiradjuri Keeping Place. There is a constant stream of activities, events and exhibitions, visiting exhibitions such as the Bald Archies, the Temora Local and Family History Research Centre, Temora Shed 4 Men, TEMFM, and the Visitor Information Centre. Photo: Temora Shire Council*

In 2017 across the nation, local government investment in culture and heritage was \$1.5 billion, representing over 27% of the total national investment by all governments. This substantial contribution comprises capital expenditure such as building and maintenance, as well as recurrent expenses such as staffing and ongoing programs and events.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the CMA membership has a strong and vested interest in the development of the National Cultural Policy ("the Policy"). Our Members want to ensure that the Policy reflects the arts and cultural needs and aspirations for all of Australia.

## The Ten Principles

The CMA supports the continued commitment to the Ten Principles however; we make the following comments and suggestions:

1. **First Nations arts and culture are First Nations led** – the CMA supports this Principle; we recognise and respect the crucial place First Nations' stories play in Australia's arts and culture.

<sup>2</sup> "The Economic Value of Arts, Screen and Culture in NSW", Create NSW, July 2018

<sup>3</sup> "A New Look at Culture: Towards the State's first Arts", Culture & Creative Industries Policy", LGNSW, 2023

2. ***All Australians, regardless of language, literacy, geography, age or education, have the opportunity to access and participate in arts and culture*** – the CMA notes that “location” is missing from this list, we do not believe that the word “geography” sufficiently covers the need for all Australians, regardless of where they choose to live and work, to have the opportunity to access and participate in arts and culture. We request that the word “location” be added to this Principle.
3. ***Artists and arts workers have career structures that are long-term and sustainable, supported by vocational pathways*** – the Local Government sector is one of the largest, if not the largest employer of arts’ workers in Australia, thousands are employed although it is rarely acknowledged. Consequently, councils are already strongly invested in this Principle and are delivering on it. The career opportunities that are provided by Local Government, everything from sound and production to librarians and museum officers should be recognised within the new Policy.
4. ***Australian students have the opportunity to receive an education that includes culture, creativity, humanities and the arts*** – the CMA supports this Principle but believes that it is too narrow. We suggest that the word “students” be removed from the Principle, to make it more encompassing and inclusive. It should read “Australians have the opportunity to receive an education” not just students which implies people attending school. The change would also recognise the generally accepted concept of life-long learning.

This Principle assumes that there will be arts and humanities teachers able to provide the opportunity for students to gain an education in the arts, however we note the unprecedented decline in applied arts courses at university level across Australia. It has been reported that more than 40 creative courses and degrees have been axed in less than a decade.<sup>4</sup> Many of these courses and degrees have been removed from regional universities, like Charles Sturt, James Cook and Charles Darwin.

It is important that the new Policy address who those opportunities to receive an education will be provided without teachers or trained artists.

5. ***Creative talent is nurtured through fair remuneration, industry standards and safe and inclusive work cultures*** – the CMA supports this Principle not just with words but with action. As stated above Local Government is one of the largest employers of creative talent in Australia. Councils are committed to providing fair remuneration that meets industry standards and that is both safe and inclusive.
6. ***Arts and cultural organisations have representation and leadership that is reflective of contemporary Australia*** – the CMA strongly supports this Principle and is very disappointed that it was not actioned in the appointments made to the expert and advisory panels that will lead the development of the new Policy. One-third of the Australian population live in a remote, rural or regional location and yet it has no genuine regional representation on the panels that are directing its development.
7. ***Cultural infrastructure, including galleries, venues, theatres, libraries, museums, archives and digital collections, is restored, built and maintained*** – Local Government is the biggest investor and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/feb/09/australia-in-danger-of-becoming-an-artless-country-as-enrolments-in-creative-courses-collapse>

provider of cultural infrastructure in Australia; therefore, the CMA strongly supports this Principle. We would like to see this Principle amended to include the words “regardless of location” to ensure that remote, rural and regional Australia is not forgotten.

8. ***Australian stories are seen and heard, regardless of platform*** – the CMA strongly supports this Principle, as the world becomes more global in outlook it is essential that we hear and see local stories. In addition, these stories must reflect all of Australia, therefore we would like to see the Principle amended to say “regardless of platform or location”.
9. ***Creative industries and practice are future focused, technology enabled, networked and globally recognised, including through reciprocal exchange, export and cultural diplomacy*** – there are so many world class creatives that choose to live and work in remote, rural and regional Australia, it is imperative that whatever initiatives arise from this Principle they are accessible to all artists.
10. ***Arts and culture are generative (creating new works and supporting emerging artists) and preservative (protecting heritage and conserving cultural memory)*** – local councils across Australia are supporting both generative and preservative arts and culture through theatres, performance spaces, galleries, libraries and museums. It is important that the Local Government sector is not forgotten in the actions that are taken once the new Policy is implemented.

## The Five Pillars

Overall, the CMA agrees with the continuation of the five pillars. We have addressed each below with comments on the challenges and opportunities the CMA sees from a regional NSW and a Local Government perspective.

It is important to note however that remote, rural and regional Australia is not a homogeneous community, it is diverse encompassing a multiplicity of ethnicity, ages, occupations and incomes with wide ranging aspirations and challenges. Within that eco-system can be found vibrant artistic endeavours, world-renown artists working with dedicated community volunteers and local councils providing support. Therefore, when the Government is considering initiatives for non-metro Australia it is important to always remember that one-size cannot possibly fit all.

In addressing the pillars we have responded from a Regional NSW perspective and then from a Local Government perspective. We recognise that at times the perspectives overlap, they are not always the same.

## First National First

### ***Regional NSW***

The CMA recognise and respect the crucial place of First Nations’ stories play in Australia’s arts and culture. The CMA also recognises that in remote and rural areas, support for First Nations arts and cultural activities often comes in the form of dedicated, non-indigenous volunteers and Local Government.

In remote and rural NSW where populations are thin and the distances are vast, creating sustainable First Nations’ arts and cultural activities can require a whole of community response. Consequently,

active community partnerships are often pivotal to the successful delivery of First Nations Arts and Cultural activities. It is imperative that productive partnerships that deliver First Nations' arts and culture be encouraged and supported.

#### **Local Government**

In remote, rural and regional NSW, Local Government is the provider of virtually all arts and cultural infrastructure. If First Nations' arts and cultural output is to have a home it is most likely to be found in a council's art gallery, library, museum or performance space. In these spaces, First Nations' artists will find professional staff paid by council that will support their exhibition, performance or other creative activity.

It is not enough to say that First Nations' arts and culture should be front and centre – the question of how we ensure that the art, performance or other creative activity reaches the audiences it needs to through an appropriate venue with professional support must also be questioned. This is where Local Government inevitably fills the gap, and this role should be recognised in the new Policy.

We note that *Revive* committed to a \$50 million to establish an Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Perth and \$80 million to a National Aboriginal Art Gallery in Alice Springs, but there appeared to be nothing to support any of the other diverse aboriginal communities across Australia. For example, almost half of NSW is Wiradjuri Country, how has *Revive* supported the telling of their stories?

If the new Policy retains the current action to *support the telling of First Nations histories and stories in Australia's galleries, libraries, archives and museums*, then council-owned and operated arts' venues are going to be critical to the action being delivered. The CMA believes that support should be provided directly to Local Government in remote, rural and regional locations so that this can occur.

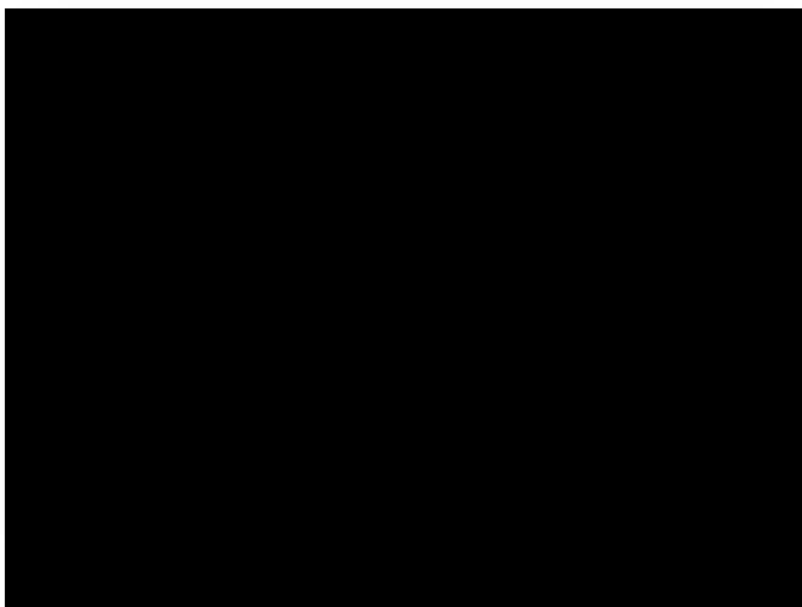
### **A Place for Every Story**

#### **Regional NSW**

The CMA agrees and supports the statement in *Revive* that *“Regional artists are critical to a vibrant arts sector that reflects Australia's depth and diversity. A thriving cultural and creative sector is also crucial to supporting Australia's regional communities and local economies.”*

Arts and cultural activities are pivotal to creating community wellbeing, connectedness and cohesion. Remote, rural and regional communities are now called home by people from a range of ethnicity, and it is important that they also have a place to tell their stories.

Wagga Wagga City Council's FUSION festival is a good example of the ways that regional NSW celebrates its diverse population.



Where story telling platforms are created through events, it is often the case in remote, rural and regional locations that these events, activities and performances are dependent on volunteer labour for their success. While *Revive* has focused on “professionalism” and “the artist”, it should not be ignored that the platforms accessed by artists to tell their stories are often provided and supported by an enthusiastic group of volunteers.

Volunteer burn-out has become a very real issue for many of the communities that our Members represent. When this occurs a well-established festival or event ceases, this usually happens suddenly although in retrospect many will say that falling volunteer numbers made the cessation of the event inevitable.

The CMA recommends that the new Policy include recognition and support for volunteers and volunteered-delivered events and activities. This could take the form of financial assistance for part-time administrative/co-ordination support, that could be housed within the local council. The continuity provided by this type of position would remove some of the weight on volunteers, allowing them to focus more on content than on paperwork.

The CMA strongly supports the continuation of *Revive’s* commitment to increase support for regional arts and culture through an increase to the Regional Arts Fund (“RAF”), and continuation of the Festivals Australia program. Targeted funding for the artists and arts activities in regional areas is vitally important. The RAF recognises that amazing artists choose to live and work outside of metro areas and provides those artists with funding that supports the development and creation of their stories. Many of those stories reflect the life and living in remote, rural and regional locations.

### **Local Government**

Again, as the key provider of venues and primary organiser of artistic events and activities in rural, remote and regional NSW, councils are providing the platforms and opportunities for artists to tell their stories.



*Laneways of Lismore light show, Photo: Lismore City Council*

Often as stated above these platforms are festivals, events and activities at council-owned venues, supported by council staff. There is, however, an increasing expectation that when a volunteer-led activity such as a local festival is in danger of folding because of volunteer burn-out that the council steps in with staff and resourcing. Remote,

rural and regional councils are cash-strapped, providing this type of resourcing is usually beyond local budgets. Therefore, the CMA supports the introduction of funding for administrative/co-ordination support for local festivals and events, that could be housed within council and provide direct assistance to volunteer events.

Local Government is also providing the venues and opportunities for young artists and creatives to develop their skills, test their boundaries and create their stories. Every prima ballerina in Australia started out in at ballet classes in a community hall, every concert pianist started with piano lessons, lighting and sound engineers cut their teeth on local festivals and events and Australian Oscar and BAFTA winners trod the boards for the first time at the local theatre or council-owned performance space.

All artistic stories start somewhere, that somewhere is often in a council owned and operated facility or at a council delivered event or activity. The future of arts and culture starts with accessible opportunities to become creative, it is important to recognise that Local Government in remote, rural and regional areas is pivotal in providing those opportunities. Therefore, as stated previously the CMA would like to see recognition of this role in the new Policy and support or that work in new funding initiatives.

### **Centrality of the Artist**

#### **Regional NSW**

The CMA agrees with *Revive's* statement that *"too often artists have not been considered real workers, arts businesses have not been considered real businesses, and arts training courses have not been considered as training for real jobs."*

In remote, rural and regional NSW artists do struggle to earn a living from their artistic endeavours, although the CMA recognises that this is the same for many of their city-cousins.

It is also a function, for many, of the lump nature of their income. Visual artists who work from exhibition to exhibition, often earn income in "lumps" rather than as a continuous stream. The Australian Taxation System is not well suited for this type of income generation and therefore, artists are penalised accordingly, by not immediately being able to spread their earnings to future years.

The CMA supports Regional Arts Australia's ("RAA") proposals to the Art of Tax Reform Summit for the introduction of a Creative Industries Management Deposit Scheme and the recognition of Portfolio Incomes.

The Deposit Scheme proposal, which is modelled on the existing Farm Management Deposit Scheme, would allow artists to bank earnings made and only pay tax on it once it is withdrawn, interest earned on the banked earnings becomes taxable in the year it is earned. The Scheme would allow artists to spread their earnings forward making their arts' businesses more financial sustainable.

Many artists, like many Australians, are working multiple jobs, however, only one of those jobs attracts the Tax-Free Threshold. The CMA agrees with RAA that it is time for a structural change to the way that the Tax-Free Threshold is applied, so that the current practice of Portfolio Incomes (where income is earned from a portfolio of jobs, not one single position) is recognised and supported. Recognition of

Portfolio Incomes, would allow workers to receive the benefits of their work at the time the work is done, not be forced to wait until their tax return is lodged.

The Policy should address structural changes in the tax system that would make the business of being an artist easier and more sustainable.

We note and support *Revive's* focus on arts education but are disappointed that it effectively stops at school level. The Guardian in an article in February of this year wrote:

*Australia risks becoming an "artless country" if it does not address the long-term decline in enrolments in creative courses, with more than 40 courses and degrees axed in less than a decade.<sup>5</sup>*

Many of those courses have been cut from regional institutions. Where do young, regional artists go to further their studies, learn more about their craft, be inspired by the wisdom and experience of others if there are no regional, tertiary institutions delivering arts' courses? The new Policy must address higher education learning opportunities for artists.

### **Local Government**

Local Government is committed to ensuring that the artists and arts workers that it employs and engages are treated with respect; where they are employees they are paid as per the award and where they are engaged as contractors they are paid as per industry standards. Councils are committed to providing a safe environment for all artists and arts workers they employ or engage.

In remote, rural and regional areas, employment provided by councils in arts and culture is significant. However, we recognise that it is often casual and can also be seasonal. The NSW Government recently introduced the [Fresh Start for Local Government Apprentices, Trainees and Cadets Program](#). The Program provides councils, county councils and joint organisations with grants to directly employ apprentices, trainees, and cadets to roles which will counter existing skill shortages or meet community priorities. The Program has been incredibly successful, with hundreds of mostly young people being employed in training roles.

The CMA strongly recommends that the Government consider introducing a similar program that targets arts and cultural workers providing them with genuine training opportunities that develop their skills as well as providing them with full time work.

## **Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

### **Regional NSW**

We agree with *Revive's* assessment that "organisations of all sizes and types provide cultural infrastructure that enables Australia's cultural and creative sector to flourish." In regional NSW the bulk of bricks and mortar infrastructure, like performing arts centres, theatres, museums, community halls, libraries, galleries and even cinemas are built and maintained by the local council.

This bricks and mortar infrastructure is the backbone of arts and culture delivery. While we note *Revive's* acknowledgement of the increasing use of on-line infrastructure, with all due respect this

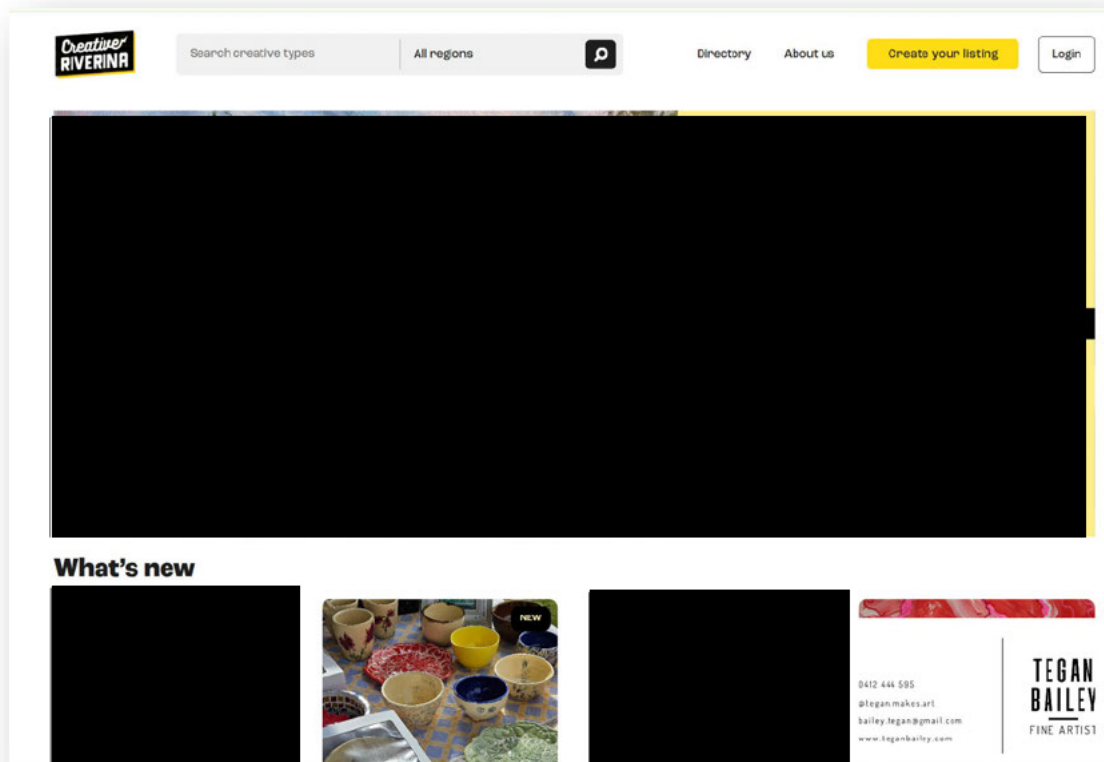
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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/feb/09/australia-in-danger-of-becoming-an-artless-country-as-enrolments-in-creative-courses-collapse>

cannot replace the in-person attendance at an event like the ballet, the opera, a play or recital. You cannot see the brush strokes, hear the nuance in a soliloquy or truly feel the impact of work if you are not there with it. While on-line delivery has its place, increasing the reliance on it, or relying on it as a replacement for staged work, is a disservice to artists and audiences alike.

Also important in the infrastructure for arts and cultural delivery in regional NSW are the 15 Regional Arts Boards ("RAB") that service remote, rural and regional NSW. The Boards are independent bodies whose major role is maximise the opportunities available to practitioners and creative groups in the regions they represent.

Most receive some financial support by way of membership fees from their local councils; they also receive support from Create NSW. The RABs are also heavily involved at a grassroots level in the



*Eastern Riverina Arts, ( a Regional Arts Board) hosts [Creative Riverina](#) which in online infrastructure that allows artists, arts organisations, activities and venues to publicise their activities.*

delivery of the Federal Government's Regional Arts Fund. The CMA understands the RAB structure is unique to NSW, and we believe that it is a networked approach that should be recognised in the new Policy.

While we note *Revive's* recognition of the opportunities to foster partnerships between commercial and not-for-profit arts sector organisations to drive co-investment, it is important to remember that in remote and rural Australia markets are traditionally thin and therefore not as attractive to commercial investment. In remote, rural and regional NSW, the delivery of cultural infrastructure falls to community not-for-profit enterprises and local government. Where there is a commercial provider, it is likely to be a small, private owned gallery.

Consequently, the CMA supports RAA's submission to the Art of Tax Reform, proposing the introduction of non-commercial leasing arrangements. Under this arrangement landlords would be permitted to write-off the rent loss that would result from leasing premises at a non-commercial rate to a creative Industries' business. This would allow the landlord to keep the rent at a commercial level, ensuring that landlord's financial arrangements are not put at risk, while encouraging them to lease to creatives.

#### *Local Government*

As stated above, councils in NSW manage more than 4,000 cultural sites. Communities everywhere expect that their local councils will keep the lights on and the services delivered at their library, museum, art gallery, community halls and performance spaces. In addition, councils in most remote, rural and regional communities are providing the staffing, that delivers the programming and supports performances and exhibitions.

Many councils have looked to on-line infrastructure as a way of increasing access to artistic and cultural works, particularly digitisation of local collections held by museums and galleries. The digitisation of collections is a resource intensive exercise that reaps benefits through increasing accessibility.

Councils, however, are struggling to find the funds to deliver cultural infrastructure and services. Councils want to provide the best possible audience experience which will result in on-going engagement, providing meaningful on-line opportunities and supporting the creation, exhibition and performance of local works, however, this comes at a price which many councils battling to meet.

The new Policy should recognise the pivotal role that Local Government plays in providing bricks and mortar infrastructure as well as on-line infrastructure, and the need to assist in supporting its maintenance and upgrade as well as the costs involved in the provision of supporting infrastructure.

### ***Engaging the Audience***

#### *Regional NSW*

As stated earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to delivering arts and cultural activities in remote, rural and regional areas. Audience engagement comes in all shapes from a First Nations' Basket Weaving Circle to the NSW Schools' Spectacular to the Handa Opera.

The importance of smaller activities in generating audience engagement should not be discounted. Community-based arts' societies, theatre groups, choirs, book clubs and orchestras are very important in nurturing young talent and developing audience engagement. For many, their first engagement with the arts is at a community event, activity or festival often run by volunteers with support of the local council.

The Policy, when considering the issue of engagement, should recognise the importance of community-based activities in fostering audience engagement

Early engagement with the arts can lead to a lifetime love. *Revive* recognises this with its focus on arts education. However, engagement also comes through participation in activities like dance, music, theatre delivered by an array of private teachers some

running small businesses, some working through community organisations. It is important that the new Policy recognises the importance of these teachers in nurturing and training young artists. Most of our renown artists would have taken their earliest creative steps with these teachers.

#### *Local Government*

Councils often fail to recognise their pivotal role in developing audience engagement. However, it is the council staff that program for the council-owned theatres, performance spaces, galleries and museums who do so with an eye on what will be engaging. They make decisions weighing the balance between the “tried and true” and work that pushes the boundaries. The decisions consider ways to nurture and showcase First Nations’ work, locally based artists, established works and emerging artists while ensuring that they are connecting with the communities they serve.

The Policy should recognise that role and find ways to support councils to deliver arts and cultural events and activities locally. Remote, rural and regional councils across NSW are genuinely in a battle for financial sustainability, the Policy needs to consider what would happen if councils could no longer afford to not just provide the venues but also program for them.



*One Book One Temora is one of the Riverina Region's largest summer book clubs, hosted by the Temora Shire Library. Locals read the same selected novel over the summer, culminating in a community evening and meet-the-author event. Photo: Temora Shire Council*

## Conclusion

The CMA recognises the tension that inherently exists between supporting and encouraging artists to take their art to the world and ensuring local voices can be heard locally whether that be in outback NSW or the middle of Melbourne.

Balance is the key – a Policy document that recognises the need to genuinely support artistic and cultural endeavours regardless of the artform or where it is created, performed or exhibited. The Government’s efforts to encourage the creation and delivery of works for the world stage – art as an export, should be balanced with the need to nurture and support local work or emerging artists.

There is no question that the CMA wants to see a greater focus on the 10 million people that call remote, rural and regional Australia home. We also want to see continuing support for artists who live and work in regional communities. To that end we commend the Government for its on-going commitment to the RAF because it establishes a clear focus on the regions and the amazing work that is created.

The CMA would like to see the Policy result in more targeted support provided to Local Government to deliver the cultural infrastructure, events and activities that our regional artists and communities depend on, so that they are more sustainable.

The CMA believes the new National Policy should recognise the important work that volunteers do to deliver the events and activities upon which so many artists depend in order to display and sell their work, create new work and perform work.

We remain concerned that the Policy will focus on the big end of town, the national cultural institutions like the Australian Ballet, Bangarra, Sydney Symphony and Opera Australia. The CMA is not dismissing the extraordinary role these institutions play, particularly on the world stage, in supporting and reinforcing our cultural identity. However, almost every one of the performers that work with a national cultural institution, learned their craft in a local hall, tested their skills at a local eisteddfod or on the stage with the local theatre group, with most supported by volunteer labour and the local council.

Therefore, we believe that the Policy must strike a balance in supporting both highly professional artistic endeavours and local activities that nurture artists and build audience engagement.

If the National Cultural Policy is committed to telling the stories from across Australia, then it should specifically address the needs of remote, rural and regional communities. The communities our CMA members represent want to see that their cultural and artistic uniqueness is recognised by the Federal Government with a policy document that genuinely takes their needs and aspirations into account.

The CMA welcomes the opportunity to provide its viewpoint on the National Cultural Policy and also thanks the staff of the Department for the time they have taken during the consultation period to meet with us to discuss our concerns.