

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## Arts and Culture Alliance Blue Mountains

### 1. Are you submitting this submission (tick all that apply):

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation
-------------------------------------	---

### 2. What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

#### 2.1 First Nations

##### CHALLENGE

A key challenge is the difference in knowledge systems between First Nations and non-Indigenous people. \*

In the Blue Mountains, the challenge is also the small resident First Nations population (2.7%) so that the same people get called upon all the time to contribute, on behalf of First Nations people, to non-Indigenous led events, projects and meetings. First Nations people are also hesitant about sharing cultural knowledge for commodification in a tourism-based economy.

##### OPPORTUNITY

There is an opportunity for the National Cultural Policy to facilitate a two-way learning approach for non-Indigenous people to understand these knowledge system differences and help mutual understanding and appreciation in place-specific locations. Although over 96% of the Blue Mountains population is of European cultural heritage (predominantly Anglo-Celtic) it is socially progressive in cultural and political attitudes in terms of reconciliation with First Nations peoples, as well as to refugees and asylum seekers, and in terms of environmental issues around caring for Country – particularly in the context of bushfires and eco-tourism.

Therefore there is significant good will to support and understand First Nations voices and cultural expression, which would benefit from greater understanding of the difference in knowledge systems as explored through the arts.

#### 2.2 A Place for Every Story

##### CHALLENGE

The National Cultural Policy needs to acknowledge locational and environmental diversity as well as ethnic diversity. The Blue Mountains community lives in a unique environment; a highly dispersed peri-urban area located wholly within a national park between a metropolitan city of five million people and inland Regional NSW.

##### OPPORTUNITY

There is an opportunity for the National Cultural Policy to recognise and respond to these “in-between zones” as a wider issue that impacts many other dispersed peri-urban areas in terms of funding eligibility and infrastructure provision, and to recognise the power of socially-engaged arts and cultural practice at the local level, including its inclusion across ‘portfolios’ such as health, urban place enhancement, education, science, technology infrastructure, economic vitality and other areas.

#### 2.3 The Centrality of the Artist

##### CHALLENGE

Culture is more than the arts but the arts are central to culture, as demonstrated in the role of the arts in the survival of First Nations Cultures. However, despite this central role, artists are

chronically underpaid and marginalised and the groups that support them are inadequately resourced to support the development of arts-related projects.

#### OPPORTUNITY

There is a significant opportunity for the National Cultural Policy to respond to the two key challenges: the lack of financial and policy support for artists and arts workers and the lack of funded administrative infrastructure for small to medium arts organisations to support their work in our region and elsewhere. As a matter of principle, the National Cultural Policy should commit to the adequate funding of artists, arts workers and the basic organisational capacity of small to medium arts organisations, similar to that provided to community service organisations. In particular, in acknowledgement of the impact of COVID on the arts sector, and the precarity of income in this sector, the Government should investigate a Basic Guaranteed Income scheme for registered artists and arts workers, such as is currently being undertaken by a number of European Governments, including Ireland. This could be set at the weekly \$750 COVID supplement rate, with an allowable income above this to the level of the median wage before it cuts out, much like allowable income provisions in Australian pension arrangements. The rate acknowledges the high level of professional skills in this sector.

### **2.4 Strong Institutions**

#### CHALLENGE

Small to medium arts organisations are the equivalent of small businesses, with arts workers working as casuals or entrepreneurs, on mostly low incomes. They are a dedicated group of professional art workers and volunteers. These individuals and their organisations are now impacted by rising rental costs and lack of affordable access to council owned venues, particularly in the Blue Mountains.

While Blue Mountains City Council has invested in cultural infrastructure, the range of cultural facilities and services provided or funded by all levels of government is not well aligned with the diverse needs of artists and small to medium arts organisations across the Blue Mountains, and does not provide flexible multi-purpose spaces. Further, Blue Mountains Council's user-charges policy like that of many other councils is based on the traditional time-based hiring approach that makes its facilities unaffordable to many small to medium arts groups, and often unavailable when needed for the times required.

#### OPPORTUNITY

In committing to the provision of adequate funding to support capacity-building by small to medium arts organisations (see point 2.3), the National Cultural Policy should recognise the need for additional financial support for these organisations to cover rising rental costs and constraints on relying on high levels of volunteerism that is increasingly hard to source.

There is also an important opportunity for the National Cultural Policy to formalise a strategy to more effectively use federal/state/local funding to support local government in providing new flexible multi-purpose cultural spaces, address the under-utilisation of spaces and maintenance of existing facilities as a basis for providing affordable access to cultural and arts groups in our peri-urban region.

### **2.5 Reaching the Audience**

#### CHALLENGE

Blue Mountains artists and cultural organisations have difficulty in reaching our audiences because of constraints on access to suitable multipurpose venues. This also affects touring companies visiting our region.

In addition, neither of the two main dedicated arts venues owned and managed by Council are designed as multipurpose facilities, despite the fact that they are located 30km apart. This

division in specialities between these facilities also isolates the upper and lower mountains in terms of overall arts focus, as they are unable to encompass the diversity of arts and cultural practice throughout our expansive region. Council administrative practices also are limited in their ability to foster an innovative and flexible approach to facilitate wider community engagement with the use of these facilities or with other Council buildings, which could be used on a temporary basis for cultural activities.

#### OPPORTUNITY

The National Cultural Policy should encourage innovation and flexibility as key criteria in federal funding programs supporting the provision of local cultural facilities, particularly in areas with peri-urban dispersed settlement patterns such as the City of Blue Mountains. The Policy should also recognise and respond to the particular financial challenges that such councils face and also work with state governments to reduce any compliance barriers to the flexible and adaptive use of council and other buildings.

### **3. Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:**

#### **3.1 First Nations**

We want to build and nurture a modern and inclusive culture that respects all-comers with a clear acknowledgement of the land and First Peoples' spiritual and cultural knowledge and which recognises the complexity of living in this UNESCO protected world heritage area, the land of the Gundungurra, Dharug and other language groups, and in wider Australia.

We would like to find a way to promote two-way cultural learning through our different small to medium arts organisations that celebrates the full complexity of what First nations people mean by 'caring for Country' (Ngurra).

*Ngurra takes in everything within the physical, cultural, and spiritual landscape - landforms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, minerals, stories, and special places. It includes cultural practice, kinship, knowledge, songs, stories, and art, as well as spiritual beings, and people: past, present, and future (Aunty Sharyn Hall, Gundungurra Elder).*

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

The Blue Mountains has a very engaged community with a high number of people actively participating in lots of different arts and cultural activities, and with a high dependence on volunteerism.

The Blue Mountains also has a unique elongated geography, with the population dispersed over a 100km of ridgelines, with a long string of small villages. This requires a range of dispersed multi-purpose arts facilities, particularly serving the Upper Mountains area (Wentworth Falls to Mt Victoria and across to Mt Wilson) as well as the Mid Mountains, and the Lower Mountains with its easier access to Penrith and its arts facilities.

Our story is also very place-based because we live within the UNESCO World Heritage Area with a population that is highly sensitive to environmental sustainability issues, as evidenced by Council's Planetary Health Initiative, which provides an overarching policy framework. Our place-based story is linked to the First Nations idea of Caring for Country (Ngurra) – an idea with multiple levels of meaning: ecological, spiritual and cultural as articulated by local Gundungurra Elder, Aunty Sharyn Hall (above), and the long history of efforts by the non-Indigenous community to protect the environment in this unique landscape of awesome beauty.

#### **3.3 The Centrality of the Artist**

Artists and arts workers, through all the different forms of expression, are central to society as the keepers and custodians of cultural knowledge and change. A culture that doesn't honour this is lost.

Artists are also seers of emerging patterns and truths that need to be told. We seek funding and support from all levels of Government to respond urgently to the ability of the artist to talk to the heart as well as the minds of people in an increasingly challenging world, and to support them in this work. The arts and culture sector helps us understand issues of meaning, purpose, and identity as we grapple with our evolving national identity as a multicultural nation in which those of European cultural heritage still occupy most positions of influence and wealth. In this we would like to acknowledge the important role of the ABC and SBS in meeting this challenge nationally, but then we need to translate this down to the local level.

### **3.4 Strong Institutions**

Council provides most of the venues for small to medium arts organisations, but their current policy of user-charges based on a traditional short term, time-based hiring approach makes these facilities unaffordable or unavailable to many groups, and/or unavailable when needed. Strong and responsible institutions are critically important to successful art-making and cultural expression, particularly in dispersed peri-urban areas like the Blue Mountains. Councils, state agencies and small to medium arts organisations all have a role in providing this institutional framework. Such institutions also include the formation of organisations such as the Arts and Culture Alliance Blue Mountains, which provide a means for collaboration and cooperation across the sector to maximise impact and effectiveness, while retaining diversity.

The arts have a vital role to play in connection and engagement for a thriving community and also in addressing inequality and ameliorating anxiety and depression in our community. With the right support the community arts sector can rebuild confidence and a sense of community, especially in our sense of shared creative potential. This is so vital to meet the huge challenges we face, for example, seeking a successful referendum on the Voice and responding to climate change, environmental degradation, geo-political tensions, homelessness and economic insecurity, etc.

### **3.5 Reaching the Audience**

Our response demonstrates the structural and institutional barriers that artists and cultural organisations in the Blue Mountains face in reaching our audiences, but clearly these problems are not confined to one local government area. As part of the development of the National Cultural policy we would like to see the Federal government conduct a review of the use and administration of federally funded state and local government council arts and cultural facilities in terms of how accessible and affordable these publicly funded facilities are to all small and medium arts organisations and whether there are any barriers to their utilisation by these groups.

## **4. Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?**

Australia began to throw off its cultural cringe to Britain and the US when the Whitlam Labor Government celebrated and funded the arts in Australia, created strong cultural institutions and directly funded community-based organisations. Subsequently Australia began to embrace its growing multicultural identity, and began the process of reconciliation and restitution with First Nations people who suffered under colonial settler policies and practices – first with the Whitlam Government response to the Gurindji walk-off with the first Land Rights Act, then the Keating Apology to the Stolen Generation. It was the Gillard-Rudd Labor governments that grasped the centrality of our relationship with Asia and the Pacific, and the role that arts and culture could play in building these relationships.

It is now up to the Albanese Labor government to heal the cracks in these relationships that developed under the nine-year period of Coalition Government and their associated culture/religious/history wars approach to culture and knowledge. It is widely recognised that the roots of our environmental crisis and reconciliation with First Nations people are epistemic.

Funding needs to be urgently restored to arts and culture programs, particularly to the arts sector, which has a vital role to play in re-dressing the long tail of the cultural impact of these ‘culture wars’ at the local community level, and in increasing our capacity for intercultural learning.

While our National Cultural Policy rightly places First Nations culture as the foundation of Australia’s cultural identity, and recognises the diversity of voices and cultural expression that needs to be celebrated and highlighted in a multicultural nation, it faces further challenges.

The arts and culture sector can play a vital role in meeting these challenges:

1. **An economic and cultural shift towards a regenerative society** is required to deal with climate change, environmental degradation and species extinction brought about by fossil fuel energy, industrialised agriculture and food production, and the neo-liberal economic policies that have increased socio-economic inequality. The latter particularly affects the insecure, casualised, project-based nature of work in the arts and culture sector. The recent UN IPBES report identifies that approaches to the natural world in decision making need to move beyond living **from** nature (extractivism) to: living **with** nature, living **in** nature, and living **as** nature — valuing the spiritual, cultural and emotional values that nature brings to humans, as celebrated in the worldview of First Nations knowledge systems; also highlighted in the State of the Environment Report 2021 and the sober warning: “Environmental degradation is now considered a threat to humanity, which could bring about societal collapses.”.
2. **The need to contextualise a diversity of stories.** The goal of the 2013 National Cultural Policy that ‘government support reflects the diversity of Australia’ should be extended to a requirement that understanding of the diverse nature of Australian culture and society and different knowledge systems led by the First Nations people, be made central to developing the framework for support across all cultural and policy spheres to ensure that this understanding is disseminated throughout the community and enshrined in all of our institutions.
3. **The need to support the full diversity of arts and culture practices.** The National Cultural Policy should reflect the scope and extent of art and culture practices beyond traditional divisions, and across different policy areas. Supporting community wellbeing and connectivity happens at the local level through the density of networks and engagement amongst arts and culture groups across all art forms. It is also where the next generation of artistic talent takes root. Therefore infrastructure and funding should be provided to support and revitalise the use of existing assets owned by all tiers of government, and to support the development of new flexible built-for-purpose facilities. In addition, policies should be designed and implemented to ensure adequate funding is provided directly to artists and arts workers to develop and support the production of culture as a basis for an inclusive and vibrant arts community, as suggested in the proposed Guaranteed Basic Income scheme.
4. **The need for Australian stories in all their diversity to reach maximum audience.** To give Australians access to Australian stories that speak to these above challenges, we need these stories to inform the arts and reach audiences through live events and through all the new streaming services for film, music, and radio, and be supported by extensive coverage in and by all news formats and broadcasters. To give effect to a national *cultural* policy, we need media and national newspapers that celebrate arts and culture to the same extent that we celebrate sporting events.