

National Cultural Policy Submission

Brisbane Combined Unions Choir

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?

Who we are

The Brisbane Combined Unions Choir owes its existence to National arts policy. It began in 1988 as an Art and Working Life Project, jointly funded by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Council of Trade Unions to promote cultural activities by artists, art workers, and unions.

Funding ended in the early 1990's, yet the choir has continued mainly with a mix of in-kind support and membership subscriptions. We are open without audition to any union member, retired or unemployed singer who shares our social justice values. We have approximately 30 members. We are an independent, incorporated not-for-profit [NFP] community organisation with collective management by committee.

We trust the information below about the Choir assists policy makers consider possible remedies to the situation facing many small community arts organisations whose work is vital to increasing Participation and Inclusion.

We fully support the five pillars contained in the Consultation paper and the pillar most relevant to the Choir is *A Place for Every Story*.

Overall, we strongly encourage funding of community cultural development activities, in particular funds for decent pay and conditions for arts workers to support diverse community groups who volunteer to create and share artistic endeavours, as well as dedicated funding streams for NFP community arts.

First Nations

While Choir members tend to be from settler and migrant communities we strongly support additional funding for community cultural development for First Nations groups.

This pillar is important to our choir because we have a focus on human rights, including the rights of First Nations people. Our choir begins each rehearsal, meeting and performance with an acknowledgement of country. We include in our repertoire many related songs including an original Brisbane Acknowledgement Song (by local musician Ann Bermingham), Whose Hand about the Mapoon dispossession (Ian Hills and Margaret Kitamura) and Stolen Child, a Songlines choir song by local Wangerriburra and Birri Gubba man Sam Watson (with Mark Shortis).

Challenge: Enacting good intentions in respectful ways

We hope to develop a project in 2023 around the Statement from the Heart / Voice to Parliament and are reaching out to local First Nations groups to work out what a collaboration might look like.

Developing culturally safe practice will require reflection and learning. That said, a previous Reconciliation project was successful in that it contributed to the formation of another choir, Songlines (now sadly in recess partly due to covid and partly due to lack of funds).

A Place for Every Story

Participation in the choir

We believe art belongs to the people. If you can talk, you can sing. We are all artists. Art connects us to one another and to our audience. We sing with purpose about our labour history, our cultural history, social and environmental justice, First Nations rights and peace. Our music educates us and tells us and our audience who we are. We do not require an audition to join.

Amplifying the voice of workers

We network with national union choirs and local South East Queensland community choirs to share music and develop events.

We strive to develop a project every year. To encourage participation in our projects we generally use social action research methods; interviewing participants so we can tell their authentic stories in song and theatre. We listen to local stories and develop cohesive, scripted drama and music in collaboration with paid professional artists.

We perform about once a month and make some work also available on our website – notably a video version of Solidarity used for the Qld virtual Labour Day celebration during covid, and an online performance of Under the Cover of Covid developed from interviews with front-line workers in collaboration with a team of theatre, music and video professionals. [You can view on the choir website at <http://combinedunionschoir.org.au/watch-our-videos>.]

Challenges to participation and inclusion

Small community arts groups like the Choir have been struggling through covid, as have other arts groups. We lost our usual gigs that helped us generate funds but were able to continue operating through zoom, whereas many community choirs have folded.

Solutions to create space for every story

Fund community arts as a category, especially NFP groups.

Use community cultural development officers to network across cities and regions so that opportunities to be involved in community arts are communicated more broadly and groups are offered support in establishing and administering their organisations.

Offer skill development sessions for management committees of community arts organisations so they can navigate and be successful in applying for grants and managing projects to completion.

The Centrality of the Artist

The Choir sees all members as artists and at its core it's about the right of ordinary working people to roses as well as bread. Participation in the arts enables wellbeing through communal joy in singing about issues of importance to us.

That said, paid art workers are essential to NFP community arts organisations.

Principally, our musical director is the artist most vital to our continued creative practice. We rehearse on a weekly basis and perform for the public on average of once a month. Most of the membership subscriptions go towards engaging our musical director on a part-time salary (rather than a casual as is the case with many other community choirs). In keeping with our union values, we pay not just wages but also minimum call out fees and on-costs such as superannuation and sick leave.

Projects involve collaboration with other artists. We negotiate payment for creative works such as script development, song writing and arranging for four parts, and rehearsing members doing scenes for performance. We generally sing acapella but sometimes we engage musicians to provide instrumental accompaniment. Normally we need a grant to achieve this. We have managed, on time and on budget, a number of funded projects such as Workers on the Water (1998), Fair Play Cabaret (2006) and the Accidental Murder CD (2012).

Challenges to the centrality of the artist

Being able to pay them. We have no ongoing funding and aim to meet our costs through membership subscriptions, performance fees, and donations. In addition to artist costs we need to pay insurances, professional memberships, internet and zoom services, administration and accounting fees. At our current rate of costs over income we have an annual deficit of \$4000, this we generally try to make up with a project performance.

Solutions to bring artist to the centre / support creative collaborations

Fund subsidies to NFP community arts organisations to enable employment of professional artists for up to three years to enable artists to have some income security. Ensure contracts for workers employed using National Cultural / Arts grants are compliant with at least award minimum standards.

Fund community arts development workers to network with small NFP community organisations across the range of geographic contexts to support organisations using diverse art disciplines, foster joint activities, assist with touring shows, disseminating information on opportunities, connect to support on administration and management etc.

Strong Institutions

Effective community instigated and led institutions can enable grassroots movements to harness the passion of volunteers, so they contribute to cultural life in a myriad of meaningful ways. Benefits accrue to not only individuals through expression and social action but also creative economies by building participation and inclusion leading to a more diverse and energised cultural sector.

The challenge is to acknowledge this small 'c' culture amongst the larger and more visible Institutions such as National Galleries.

Identified funding for community arts may lift the profile of this dispersed network of cultural institutions.

Reaching the Audience

As noted above the Union Choir has produced some online materials. We have also made numerous tours, mainly when we were able to secure funding but always with members paying their way to a large extent. We are Brisbane based and have also performed in Barcaldine, Warwick, Toowoomba, Ipswich, Hervey Bay and Gold Coast.

Without funding and organisational support we have more recently been unable to reach audiences outside greater Brisbane. Our ability to travel continues to be affected by covid.