



National Cultural Policy Submission

About Newcastle Writers Festival

Newcastle Writers Festival (NWF) is a small arts organisation, which was established in 2012 and has since become one of the largest regional literary festivals in Australia. We champion writing and ideas, sharing stories and connecting people across the Hunter Region and beyond. NWF's core business is presenting an annual festival and we will celebrate our 10th event in 2023 (delayed by a year because of Covid). We were the first literary festival in Australia – and arguably the world – to pivot to a digital program in April 2020 as Australia grappled with the early days of the pandemic.

With the support of 160 volunteers, NWF provides a paid platform for 130 artists and supports a culture of writing and reading. In response to the needs of artists and our audience, in the past two years we have expanded our program to include digital events, an emerging writers' prize, and a soon-to-be implemented creative writing program for Hunter Region primary school students.

NWF is largely funded by the NSW and Federal Governments with additional support from the University of Newcastle and a couple of key corporate and philanthropic sponsors/donors.

Submission

This submission responds from a regional perspective to *Creative Australia* pillars 2: A place for every story and 3: The centrality of the artist.

Literary events connect an increasing number of Australians. In 2019, 4.5 million Australians attended book or literary events or festivals, or 22% of the population aged 15 years and over – up from 15% in 2016.¹ There are an estimated 100 literary festivals in Australian cities, regions and towns which cover a wide range of audiences and geographies across the country, from our largest cities through to regional events and local communities.

Prior to Covid, attendances exceeded 500,000 annually, with an additional 50,000 children and young people attending festivals through their school programs.²

Writers' festivals provide accessible social connection through inexpensive or free programs, celebrating Australian identity and connecting communities through the sharing of stories. Readers meet their favourite authors and are introduced to new voices, which are increasingly diverse.

¹ The Australia Council National Arts Participation Survey 2020

² The Australia Council 2021 Briefing Note to the Minister for the Arts (NWF contributed to consultation and the information is referenced with permission)

Literary festivals:

- are the largest employers of writers (more than 2000 writers, generating more than \$500,000 income)
- provide jobs for caterers, venue operators, event staff, and opportunities for hundreds of community volunteers
- drive regional cultural tourism and support the development of vibrant cultural hubs
- extend engagement with literature and cultural events from major metropolitan centres to regional locations across the country (for example, the Sydney Writers Festival Live and Local program in 2021 was streamed to 68 venues through 50 partners)
- contribute more than \$2million in book sales through festival bookshops.³

Festivals are an integral part of Australia's literary ecosystem, providing a platform for aspiring, emerging and established writers to share and sell their work.

The ongoing pandemic has forced many festivals, including ours, to cancel and postpone programs and the ripple effect within the literature sector has been significant, affecting book sales as well as networking and professional development opportunities. For regional writers, who can be overlooked by metropolitan festivals, the challenges have been heightened.

The pandemic combined with climate change has also revealed how vulnerable festivals are to global forces. Increasingly severe adverse weather events place all events, even those held indoors, at risk. Since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, private insurers have removed the option for communicable disease cover, resulting in many event cancellations. The margins are already so slim for literary festivals, any additional pressures could quickly force organisations to the brink.

Adding fuel to this volatile set of circumstances is the fact that the literature sector continues to be habitually underfunded by state and federal governments. Australia Council funding for literature has declined by more than 40% since 2013, and literature is the only artform not to receive targeted infrastructure support from the federal government. The situation in NSW, where NWF is located, is not much better.

Recommendations

NWF believes that the following initiatives are essential to support writers and literary festivals, and to ensure a thriving national literature sector:

- A doubling of funding to the Australia Council with a requirement that at least 10% of total arts funding be directed to the literature sector
- Meaningful acknowledgement by the government of the essential role literature plays in the lives of Australians and our national cultural identity
- Establishment of a government-backed insurance scheme for arts festivals against cancellation or capacity restrictions due to covid/widespread illness and adverse weather events

³ The Australia Council 2021 Briefing Note to the Minister for the Arts (NWF contributed to consultation and the information is referenced with permission)

- Funding for innovative artist-led creative writing programs for students with an emphasis on regional initiatives that support schools in under-served locations (especially necessary in response to the impact of Covid and severe weather events such as the northern NSW floods)
- Increased range of fellowships to support emerging and mid-career writers and provide a living wage
- Prizes awarded to artists to be tax-free, and fees or grants should not be treated as income that jeopardises access to any future Centrelink payments
- Increased opportunities for small to medium arts organisation to apply for funding to support the employment of arts workers
- Provision of business skills/governance initiative for new literary festivals to support sustainability.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate and please let me know if you require more information or I can be of further assistance.

Rosemarie Milsom
Founding Director
Newcastle Writers Festival