

National Cultural Policy Submission



May 2026 | Prepared by Rick Heath, Executive Director | cacwa.org.au



**THE CHAMBER
OF ARTS AND CULTURE**
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Table of Contents

- 1 Executive Summary 2**
- 2 Introduction 3**
- 3 From Recognition to System Design 3**
- 4 Foundational Conditions for a Thriving Cultural System..... 4**
 - 4.1 Building Understanding and Confidence to Invest 4
 - 4.2 Culture as Civic and Social Infrastructure..... 4
 - 4.3 First Nations Culture as Foundational 5
 - 4.4 Strengthening Both Supply and Demand..... 5
 - 4.5 Distinguishing Different Cultural Economies..... 6
 - 4.6 Arts Education as National Capability..... 6
- 5 Structural Challenges Requiring National Attention..... 6**
- 6 Western Australia within the National Frame..... 7**
- 7 Conclusion..... 7**

- APPENDIX: Pillar-Specific Challenges and Opportunities 8**

Acknowledgement of Country

Ngala kaaditj Whadjuk Noongar moort keyen kaadak nidja boodja

We acknowledge Whadjuk Noongar people as the original custodians of the land on which we work and the generosity with which they share their culture.

The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Western Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders both past and present.

Cover Image: Lucy the Dog meets her audience in Theatre Kimberley’s 2024 Act Belong Commit Sandfly Circus production, Small But Spectacular.
Photo by Robak Photography. September 2024.

1 Executive Summary

The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA (the Chamber) welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to developing the next National Cultural Policy and strongly supports building on the foundations established through *Revive*.

This submission argues that Australia's central cultural policy challenge is no longer proving that arts and culture have value. The evidence for their contribution to social cohesion, identity, wellbeing, education, civic participation, regional liveability and economic diversification is already substantial¹. The task now is more practical and systemic: designing the conditions that allow cultural life to thrive sustainably, visibly and equitably across the nation.

Accordingly, this submission recommends that the next National Cultural Policy move from a framework principally focused on recognition and recovery toward one focused on implementation, coordination, system design and long-term sustainability.

The submission proposes that the next policy be grounded in a broader understanding of culture as civic, social and economic infrastructure. Cultural life is not produced by artists and organisations alone. It depends on a wider ecosystem that includes audiences, education pathways, participation habits, local infrastructure, digital access, governance, workforce conditions, First Nations cultural authority, public confidence and long-term investment settings.

[Q. What you would like to see reflected in the next National Cultural Policy.]

The Chamber recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- strengthen the implementation logic underpinning the five *Revive* pillars;
- position First Nations culture as foundational to Australian identity;
- recognise culture as public and social infrastructure;
- support sustainable creative careers;
- invest in both cultural supply and cultural demand;
- restore arts education as a national capability;
- Establish formal cross-portfolio and cross-government policy mechanisms linking arts to education, health, regional development, foreign affairs, and wellbeing agendas; and,
- recognise the distinct conditions associated with Western Australia's geography, regionality, First Nations cultural leadership, Indian Ocean and Asia-facing relationships, and need for equitable national visibility.

This submission reflects themes raised from the Chamber's members and broader networks, and through the Chamber's National Cultural Policy Roundtable convened in partnership with A New Approach and the Minderoo Foundation, which identified strong sector alignment around:

- arts and creativity in education;
- whole-of-government coordination;
- funding stability and structural reform;
- regional and remote cultural equity;
- First Nations leadership and self-determination;
- public value and impact measurement; and,
- creativity, design and AI future-readiness.

¹ A New Approach, *Benefits to Society and Place* (2020).

The Chamber believes the next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity not only to support the arts sector, but to strengthen Australia's social cohesion, democratic resilience, cultural confidence and future national capability.

NOTE: Founded in 2010, the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA is a membership-based organisation representing the interests of creative and cultural practitioners, organisations and supporters, across the arts, culture and creative industries. Issues raised in this paper are derived through continuous sector dialogue and consultation with and beyond our 165 members.

2 Introduction

The Chamber supports the Australian Government's development of a new National Cultural Policy that builds on the achievements of *Revive* while responding to structural, social and economic challenges.

The five pillars established through *Revive* remain relevant and useful, however somewhat limiting in regard to structural challenges requiring national attention. The next stage of policy development requires stronger implementation frameworks, clearer policy mechanisms and improved coordination across governments and portfolios.

Australia does not lack creativity. It lacks sufficiently integrated systems, investment settings, public understanding and workforce reliability to ensure cultural life is sustainable, visible and embedded in everyday national life.

The Chamber's submission, therefore, focuses on the foundational conditions required for a thriving cultural system.

3 From Recognition to System Design

The Chamber's central proposition is that cultural policy must now move beyond narrowly focused initiatives and general recognition of the value of the arts, culture and creative industries, toward holistic system design that enables the vast opportunities the sector can offer Australian society.

For many years, cultural advocacy has focused on demonstrating the value of arts and culture. That evidence is now extensive. The challenge is no longer whether culture matters, but whether Australia has the conditions necessary for cultural life to flourish over the long term.

A mature cultural policy should therefore ask what is lost when cultural systems weaken; what conditions it requires; and how governments, communities, philanthropy and business can build confidence to invest sustainably in cultural life.

This systems-based approach recognises that cultural outcomes depend on the integration of many inputs and interdependent value chains including:

- artists and cultural workers;
- audiences and participation;
- education pathways;
- public understanding and social licence;
- community relationships;

- regional and local infrastructure;
- digital access;
- governance and leadership;
- workforce sustainability; and,
- coordinated investment settings.

These are not peripheral matters. They are core operating conditions of cultural life.

This requires strong coordination across governments, cultural institutions, education, philanthropy, business, communities and the broader creative industries ecosystem.

Cultural policy cannot sit in isolation from wider economic and social policy frameworks. It must align with the ambitions reflected in Australia’s wellbeing agenda, including the Commonwealth’s Measuring What Matters framework, and with the Productivity Commission’s work on strengthening the foundations for philanthropy, charities and the not-for-profit sector, emphasising long-term capability, participation, institutional trust, and social cohesion.

A modern cultural policy should therefore position arts, culture and creativity not as discrete sectors operating at the margins of policy, but as integrated contributors to national wellbeing, civic participation, productivity, innovation, liveability and social resilience.

Achieving this requires a shared commitment to building the enabling conditions through which cultural life can thrive across all parts of Australian society.

4 Foundational Conditions for a Thriving Cultural System

4.1 Building Understanding and Confidence to Invest

If policy does not increase confidence to invest, it will not increase investment.

Confidence depends on credibility, legitimacy, evidence and public understanding. The Chamber believes the next policy should strengthen the social licence for arts and culture by positioning cultural investment as normal, beneficial and connected to broader national priorities.

The policy should therefore articulate culture’s contribution to:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • social cohesion; | • productivity and innovation; |
| • education and critical thinking; | • identity and belonging; |
| • health and wellbeing; | • diplomacy and soft power; and, |
| • democratic participation; | • trust and civic engagement. |
| • regional liveability; | |

4.2 Culture as Civic and Social Infrastructure

The Chamber strongly supports a further broadening of the definition of cultural infrastructure.

Infrastructure is not only buildings. It also includes:

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| • programming; | • technical capability; |
| • operations; | • digital systems; |
| • governance; | • local relationships; |
| • touring systems; | • workforce development; |

- audience engagement; and,
- community trust.

Capital investment without long-term operational capacity risks limiting the public value of cultural infrastructure. The next policy should therefore link infrastructure investment with sustained support for the people and systems that activate those assets.

This is particularly important in regional and outer-metropolitan contexts where facilities alone do not guarantee participation, cultural activity or long-term community benefit.

4.3 First Nations Culture as Foundational

The Chamber supports a policy approach that positions First Nations culture as foundational to Australian cultural identity rather than as a parallel inclusion stream.

The next policy should embed:

- First Nations cultural authority;
- language and knowledge systems;
- governance and decision-making;
- intergenerational transmission;
- visibility in public life; and,
- long-term investment in First Nations-led organisations and cultural infrastructure.

The Chamber calls on the Commonwealth to align the next cultural policy more directly with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by supporting shared decision-making, community-controlled cultural organisations, and increased emphasis on language revitalisation, education, youth pathways and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

4.4 Strengthening Both Supply and Demand

The Chamber supports continued investment in artists, organisations and creative production. However, the next policy should place increased emphasis on cultural demand, participation and discoverability.

Audience engagement must extend beyond marketing activity and focus increased attention on:

- how people discover culture;
- what barriers prevent participation;
- how participation habits form;
- how cultural life becomes normalised across everyday life; and,
- how institutions remain visible and relevant in changing digital and social environments.

The Chamber recommends investment in:

- a national audience and participation strategy;
- shared audience research and data capability;
- improved participation insights;
- evidence-based audience development initiatives with demonstrated success;
- discoverability strategies; and,
- stronger investment in children and young people as creators as well as current and future audiences.

4.5 Distinguishing Different Cultural Economies

The Chamber recommends that the next policy distinguish between two interconnected but distinct cultural operating systems:

- market-facing cultural activity; and,
- non-market cultural practice.

Market-oriented activity often depends on earned income, intellectual property, export growth and commercial investment.

Non-market cultural activity frequently generates value through:

- participation;
- trust;
- belonging;
- cultural transmission;
- civic engagement; and,
- public good outcomes.

Both systems are essential. However, they require different policy tools. A sophisticated cultural policy should recognise these distinctions and avoid assuming a single investment approach will serve all forms of cultural practice across the creative industries.

4.6 Arts Education as National Capability

The Chamber strongly supports restoring arts education as a national capability. Arts and cultural learning contributes to:

- communication and collaboration;
- critical and creative thinking;
- empathy and cultural understanding;
- civic participation;
- confidence and self-expression;
- social connection and belonging; and,
- long-term cultural participation.

In an increasingly fragmented and digitally mediated society, arts education plays an important role in helping young people encounter complexity, difference and multiple perspectives. Importantly, early access to arts and culture also helps normalise cultural participation across life. This strengthens not only individual development but also the long-term sustainability of Australia's cultural system.

5 Structural Challenges Requiring National Attention

The Chamber believes the next National Cultural Policy should address several interconnected structural challenges:

- chronic instability and short-term investment;
- weak public understanding and fragile social licence;
- underdeveloped participation policy;

- geographic and access inequity;
- workforce fragility and burnout;
- fragmented policy systems; and,
- declining priority of arts education.

These issues are systemic rather than isolated. They sit across all five pillars of *Revive* and require coordinated long-term responses.

6 Western Australia within the National Frame

The Chamber emphasises that the national policy must account for geography, scale and place.

Western Australia operates within distinct metropolitan, regional and remote cultural ecologies shaped by:

- vast geography;
- dispersed populations;
- higher touring and freight costs;
- infrastructure gaps;
- strong First Nations cultural leadership;
- proximity to Asia and the Indian Ocean region; and,
- lower national visibility and connection with east coast networks.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore support:

- equitable national investment;
- stronger regional cultural infrastructure;
- regional workforce development;
- touring and producing capacity;
- cultural diplomacy connected to Australia's Indian Ocean and Asia-facing relationships; and,
- recognition of western and northern geographies within national cultural decision-making.

A national policy that does not understand distance, regionality and uneven infrastructure will not serve all Australians.

7 Conclusion

The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity not simply to renew funding arrangements or revise sector language. It is an opportunity to explain why culture matters to Australia's future and to design the conditions that allow cultural life to thrive sustainably over time.

The next policy should therefore focus on establishing broad understanding and conditions that enable the mechanisms, accountabilities and investment settings required to make cultural life sustainable, visible and equitable.

The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA encourages the Australian Government to adopt a policy framework that actively drives engagement beyond the arts portfolio, strengthens understanding, increases confidence to invest, supports sustainable creative practice, broadens participation and recognises culture as essential national infrastructure for Australia's future.

APPENDIX: Pillar-Specific Challenges and Opportunities

Pillar 1 — First Nations First

Key Challenges

- First Nations culture is still too often treated as an inclusion category rather than foundational to Australian identity and cultural life.
- Symbolic recognition has not consistently translated into long-term authority, continuity, governance or investment.
- Western governance models are frequently assumed to be universal despite many First Nations cultural structures operating differently.
- First Nations-led organisations and initiatives remain under-resourced relative to the scale of policy ambition.
- Policy settings do not yet adequately support intergenerational cultural transmission, language revitalisation and community-led cultural authority.
- There remains uneven integration of First Nations culture into everyday national cultural life, education, public space and mainstream visibility.

Key Opportunities

- Position First Nations culture as foundational to Australian identity rather than a parallel or supplementary stream.
- Embed First Nations cultural authority, governance, language and knowledge systems across the broader cultural landscape.
- Increase everyday visibility of First Nations culture across education, broadcasting, festivals, touring, digital platforms, design, and public space.
- Strengthen long-term investment in First Nations-led organisations, language centres, cultural hubs and youth pathways.
- Align cultural policy more closely with Closing the Gap priorities, particularly in education, wellbeing, language and community development.
- Support governance and funding models that recognise cultural authority beyond Western institutional structures.

Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story

Key Challenges

- Participation in cultural life remains uneven across geography, income, disability, language, age and social conditions.
- Policy settings often conflate representation, inclusion, participation and agency despite these being distinct concepts.
- Community-led and place-based cultural practice remains undervalued within national policy settings.
- Regional, remote and outer-metropolitan communities continue to experience barriers to cultural participation and infrastructure access.
- Access barriers are intensified by transport limitations, digital exclusion, cultural safety concerns and uneven local infrastructure.
- Participation data is incomplete, particularly regarding informal, community-led and under-measured cultural activity.

Key Opportunities

- Develop a more sophisticated national participation framework that distinguishes audiences, participants, co-creators and communities with agency.
- Recognise community arts and cultural development as core cultural infrastructure.
- Strengthen long-term investment in regional, remote, outer-metropolitan and underserved communities.
- Improve participation data and audience intelligence to better understand hidden or under-recognised cultural activity.
- Align cultural policy more closely with social cohesion, disability inclusion, multicultural policy, youth engagement, mental health and justice outcomes.
- Support more place-based and community-led approaches that build local cultural confidence, belonging and participation.

Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist

Key Challenges

- Artists and arts workers continue to face insecure income, burnout and unsustainable careers.
- Excessive administrative burden and project-based funding environments weaken workforce sustainability.
- Artists are frequently expected to absorb economic and professional risk within an under-capitalised system.
- Housing pressure, venue shortages and rising operational costs are placing increasing strain on creative practice.
- Regional and independent practitioners often operate simultaneously as creators, producers, facilitators and administrators with limited support.
- Arts education pathways and creative workforce pipelines have weakened significantly.
- AI and digital technologies present unresolved issues regarding copyright, consent, remuneration and creative labour extraction.

Key Opportunities

- Develop stronger national creative workforce pathways focused on sustainability, capability and career progression.
- Improve business capability, producing support and income security for artists and cultural workers.
- Reform funding and reporting systems to reduce unpaid labour and administrative burden.
- Restore arts education and creative learning as a serious national capability-building infrastructure, by embedding arts and creative learning within national education, skills and workforce strategies, including school participation, teacher capability and tertiary creative pathways.
- Strengthen protections around copyright, consent and remuneration in relation to AI and digital systems.
- Support producers, facilitators, regional practitioners and independent artists as essential components of the broader cultural ecology.
- Expand philanthropy, micro-giving and diversified funding approaches that strengthen creative careers over time.

Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Key Challenges

- Despite headway in soft infrastructure (e.g. Creative Workplaces), cultural infrastructure continues to be understood too narrowly as physical buildings and capital assets.
- Capital investment is frequently disconnected from long-term operating support, programming and workforce capacity.
- Fragmented investment systems across Commonwealth, state, local government and philanthropy create duplication and administrative burden.
- Regional communities face significant challenges relating to touring, freight, accommodation, digital access and technical workforce shortages.
- Cultural infrastructure planning often lacks alignment with long-term cultural strategy and place-based development.
- Environmental sustainability and climate resilience are not yet sufficiently integrated into cultural infrastructure policy.

Key Opportunities

- Adopt a broader national definition of cultural infrastructure that includes people, operations, programming, digital systems, governance and community relationships.
- Link capital investment with sustained operational and programming support to maximise civic and cultural outcomes (e.g. ‘percent for programming’ akin to ‘percent for art’ public art initiatives)
- Develop stronger Commonwealth-state-local coordination and long-term investment compacts, including formalisation of the Cultural Ministers Council (including local government representation) with direct input into National Cabinet.
- Strengthen regional cultural infrastructure through increased investment in touring systems, freight, accommodation, technical workforce and local producing capacity.
- Position cultural planning as an integrated component of broader place-making, liveability and regional development agendas.
- Embed environmental sustainability, adaptive reuse and climate resilience into future cultural infrastructure frameworks.
- Encourage cultural plans and long-term operating strategies as prerequisites for major infrastructure investment, mandating their requirement for cultural infrastructure projects over \$1m.

Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience

Key Challenges

- Audience engagement has arguably received less policy attention than production and supply settings.
- Australia lacks a coordinated national audience and participation strategy.
- Cultural participation patterns are changing rapidly due to digital platforms, social fragmentation and evolving audience behaviour.
- Cost-of-living pressures and changing leisure habits are creating increased competition for participation.
- Cultural institutions are not always visible, relevant or accessible to emerging audiences and younger demographics.
- Audience behaviour intelligence, discoverability and participation data remain fragmented and underdeveloped.

- Australia's cultural diplomacy and international cultural visibility remain comparatively underdeveloped, with reciprocity with international partners a key opportunity.

Key Opportunities

- Treat audience engagement and participation as central to long-term cultural sustainability.
- Develop a national audience and participation strategy, with a dedicated national agency to coordinate audience research, discoverability, participation pathways and development.
- Strengthen engagement with children and young people as future audiences, participants and creators.
- Explore pricing innovation, transport-linked access and participation incentives that reduce barriers to attendance.
- Strengthen Australia's cultural diplomacy capability and international cultural relationships.
- Position arts and culture as visible, relevant and accessible components of everyday life within contemporary digital and social environments.