

ORDINARY MEETING

13 MAY 2026

5.9

SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR THE ARTS TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEXT NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

L&C | 79/5/7-01 | #7872624

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

Endorses the attached submission to the Australian Government's Office for the Arts, to inform the development of the next National Cultural Policy.

INTERESTED PARTIES:

N/A

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Regional artists and creative workers have much to contribute to Australia's cultural landscape, offering unique perspectives and stories that reflect the diverse communities they represent.

As the Australian Government develops its next National Cultural Policy, it is calling for submissions from across the country to ensure it reflects Australia's diversity and responds to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Submissions will help to identify priorities, address emerging challenges and opportunities, build on the achievements of the current policy *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, and shape a framework that supports our cultural and creative sector into the future.

It is particularly important that submissions are received from regional areas where the challenges facing the cultural and creative sector are often felt most acutely.

BACKGROUND:

The Australian Government released the National Cultural Policy—*Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, on 30 January 2023. It is a 5-year plan to renew and revive Australia's arts, entertainment and cultural sector, so that Australia's creative workers, organisations and audiences continue to thrive and grow into the future.

While *Revive* has delivered significant progress, the cultural and creative sector continues to face challenges in a rapidly changing environment, including the lingering effects of the pandemic, increased costs of living, and shifts in audience engagement and technology.

A new National Cultural Policy is needed to provide a stable, forward-looking framework, ensuring the sector remains resilient, innovative, and inclusive. This policy will build on the achievements of *Revive*, while addressing emerging priorities and opportunities.

Revive was shaped by submissions from across the creative sector, and the development of the new policy follows this process to invite submissions from across Australia, to ensure the policy reflects Australia's many stories and creative communities. The closing date for submissions is 24 May 2026.

As one of Australia's most culturally vibrant and creatively active regional centres, with a unique blend of First Nations culture and heritage, a diverse multicultural community, world class cultural facilities, and a growing creative economy, Cairns provides a nationally relevant model for how regional cultural ecosystems can grow when long term planning, research, investment, and community engagement align.

COMMENT:

Cairns Regional Council's Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022, annual State of the Arts in Cairns (SoARTs) report cards and Final Report 2023 (a research partnership with James Cook University and CQUniversity), and the Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy were drawn from extensive sector and community consultation.

This robust evidence base has established Cairns as a vibrant, inclusive, creative, regional city. However, alongside this vibrancy, the research also identified gaps in funding, accessibility, and infrastructure that hinder the sector's full potential, limiting its growth and long-term sustainability.

To ensure that *Revive* delivers on its promise of a fair, inclusive, and thriving national cultural landscape, Council's submission highlights three critical areas identified in our SoARTs reports and sector consultation that are recommended for targeted investment:

1. Regional audience development
2. Regional creative workforce development
3. Creative development and commissioning

This investment will support regional communities to unlock their full potential and ensure a more equitable, vibrant, and future focused cultural landscape for all Australians.

OPTIONS:

Option 1 (recommended):

That Council endorses the attached submission to the Australian Government's Office for the Arts to inform the development of the next National Cultural Policy.

Option 2:

That Council does not endorse the attached submission.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Corporate and Operational Plans:

Councils' submission to the National Cultural Policy supports the following pillars of Council's Corporate Plan 2025-2030:

Focus 1: Robust economy - *Supporting a diversified and growing economy*

- Promote and protect the growth of diverse industries and small business
- Promote Cairns as a place to work, live and play
- Inspire innovation and entrepreneurship
- Optimise visitation and tourism opportunities

Focus 3: Design for liveability - *A place-based approach that celebrates our community*

- Deliver future focused planning that supports our tropical lifestyle
- Proactive advocacy and collaboration with state and federal governments
- Align policy and investment to create diverse outcomes
- Address opportunities for connected communities
- Invest in community infrastructure and services
- Promote a vibrant community that supports wellbeing, safety and resilience

Focus 4: Community & culture - *Fostering a vibrant, healthy and inclusive community*

- Position Cairns as the leading arts and cultural hub of North Australia
- Support diverse sport, cultural and community groups
- Turn up the support for live music and major events
- Provide spaces and programs for the benefit of the community

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 - CRC Submission to the Australian Government's Office for the Arts to inform the development of the next National Cultural Policy (DM# 7869751)



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Attachment 1 – Submission to the National Cultural Policy *Revive*

Strengthening Creative and Cultural Ecosystems in Regional Australia

Executive Summary

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As one of Australia's most culturally vibrant and creatively active regional centres, with a unique blend of First Nations culture and heritage, a diverse multicultural community, world-class cultural facilities, and a growing creative economy, Cairns provides a nationally relevant model for how regional cultural ecosystems can grow when long-term planning, research, and community engagement align.

Cairns Regional Council's *Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022*, annual *State of the Arts in Cairns (SoARTs)* report cards and *Final Report 2023* (a research partnership with James Cook University and CQUniversity), and the *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy* were drawn from extensive sector and community consultation.

This robust evidence base has established Cairns as a vibrant, inclusive, creative city. However, alongside this vibrancy, the research also identified gaps in funding, accessibility, and infrastructure that hinder the sector's full potential, limiting its growth and long-term sustainability.

To ensure that *Revive* delivers on its promise of a fair, inclusive, and thriving national cultural landscape, this submission highlights three critical areas identified in our SoARTs reports and sector consultation that we recommend for targeted investment:

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Recommendations for *Revive*

1. Regional Audience Development

The *SoARTs Final Report 2023* demonstrates that regional cultural ecosystems are vibrant but under-resourced. The attendance and participation numbers across the life of the strategy illustrate strong demand for cultural engagement.

However, the report also highlights the need for sustained investment to maintain and grow these audiences. Cairns' *Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022* emphasises the importance of placemaking, cultural mapping, and community-centred programming to ensure that regional audiences remain engaged, and that cultural activity reflects local identity and diversity.

Our data shows that when regional audiences are offered high-quality, locally relevant programming, participation and engagement grows and our cultural identity strengthens.

However, regional audience development faces persistent challenges:

- Limited touring access and high travel and freight costs compared to metropolitan areas
- Fewer year-round engagement programs such as workshops and community outreach than their metropolitan counterparts
- Reduced access to diverse and/or experimental artforms
- Under-resourced local organisations expected to partner with their better-resourced metropolitan counterparts to ensure successful community engagement outcomes.

Recommendation

Establish a National Regional Audience Development Fund to support:

- Multi-year community engagement programs that enable artists and organisations to target and respond to community needs over time, rather than one-off engagements
- Expand regional touring and commissioning to strengthen regional circuits and enable region-led commissioning
- Investment in First Nations-led cultural initiatives, frameworks and programming
- Multi-year partnerships between councils, arts organisations, and schools
- Investment in data analysis to support consistent process and capacity building, to better understand the gaps (e.g. demographics), and the opportunities (e.g. culturally specific programs and engagement, access needs etc)
- Digital engagement initiatives that extend reach and participation to remote communities.

Such investment will ensure that regional Australians—who make up nearly a third of the population—have equitable and sustainable access to cultural experiences.

2. Regional Creative Workforce Development

The *SoARTS Final Report 2023* identifies a critical challenge, which is shared across regional Australia: tertiary pathways in the creative industries are dwindling. This is due to institutional consolidation, rising delivery costs, and declining enrolments through a combination of increased course costs for students, and declining socio-economic conditions which affect regional populations most acutely. It has created a widening gap between emerging regional talent and the skills and training needed to sustain a creative career, significantly limiting opportunities to learn while remaining based in their communities.

At the same time, as outlined in our *SoARTs* reports, regional creative economies continue to demonstrate their potential. The strategy period generated over 6,000 short-term job opportunities and 29 long-term creative sector roles, demonstrating that regional creative economies can grow when supported. The creative industries have the potential to generate new jobs, diversify tourism offerings, contribute to economic growth, and provide opportunities to retain local talent.

Without intervention, the loss of regional tertiary pathways will continue to:

- Reduce the pipeline of skilled creative workers, directly impacting on the ability of creative organisation to deliver their core work
- Force young people to relocate for tertiary study, risking their desire to return in the longer-term, or providing a reason for them to choose not to pursue a creative career
- Undermine regional cultural identity and economic diversification.

Recommendation

Establish a Regional Creative Workforce Development Framework that includes:

- Paid traineeships, internships, industry placements and mentorships connecting emerging artists with established local creative professionals
- Micro-credential programs and scholarships delivered in partnership with regional councils and arts organisations
- Incentives for tertiary institutions to maintain or expand regional creative arts programs
- Support for regional training hubs, residencies, and industry-led learning models
- Targeted investment in skill development for specialist creative mediators such as event managers, producers, curators, lighting designers, sound designers, riggers, conservators, collections managers, marketing, ticketing, arts and disability specialists etc
- Targeted investment in First Nations cultural and creative workers, in particular in curatorial, technical, and leadership development designed and delivered by local First Nations creatives.

This investment will ensure that regional artists can develop the skills needed to build sustainable careers within their own communities.

Investment in First Nations cultural leadership and career pathways is vital for a sustainable creative sector, particularly in regional areas where there are high populations of First Peoples such as Cairns. Cairns' cultural identity is deeply rooted in the stories and heritage of its 11 Traditional Owner groups and a large community of Torres Strait Islander Peoples (10.6% of the Cairns population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander at the last census).

The *SoARTs Final Report 2023* emphasises the need for self-determined and First Nations-led approaches, effective collaborative procedures for the preservation of cultural knowledges and objects, and further opportunities to platform creative and cultural practice, to position Cairns as a national and international hub for First Nations culture and creativity.

This aligns strongly with *Revive's* commitment to First Nations First principles.

3. Creative Development and Commissioning

Both the *Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022* and the *SoARTS Final Report 2023* highlight the importance of creative development, commissioning, and infrastructure in sustaining a mature artistic ecosystem.

The opening of the Cairns Performing Arts Centre and Court House Gallery during the strategy period, and resulting impact on attendance and participation, demonstrates how infrastructure investment can catalyse artistic output and community engagement.

The *SoARTS Final Report 2023* also notes that in addition to infrastructure to support presentation outcomes, there is a need for access to affordable rehearsal and studio spaces for artists to develop their creative practice and new work.

This is particularly important for regional artists, who often face a ‘development plateau,’ due to fewer creative development and commissioning opportunities outside of metropolitan centres, and limited access to a smaller pool of affordable rehearsal and studio spaces. This means they face more protracted pathways to build and sustain their profile and visibility.

Our strategy’s success in activating the Regional Arts Development Fund, supporting 340 projects with over \$2 million in investment, shows that targeted funding yields strong outcomes – however the limited funding pool and small grant sizes means that the fund does not provide sufficient support for mid-career and established artists, who may be working with larger collectives of collaborating artists, at a larger scale, or wanting to extend their creative ambition or work across disciplines.

Investment in sustained development opportunities is needed for artists at all stages of their careers; mid-career and established artists are also essential to the health of regional cultural ecosystems. They mentor emerging practitioners, lead major projects, strengthen the profile of creative practice in the region, and contribute to the cultural identity and economic vitality of their communities.

Regional creatives consistently highlight the need for:

- Sustained timeframes for creative development; development periods are frequently short-term with a presentation outcome required due to current funding parameters and amounts available
- Commissioning opportunities of a variety of scales, for work that reflects regional stories and perspectives – the cost of touring from regional areas means that artists often design smaller scale, more affordable works which limits their creative ambition
- Support for cross-regional and regional-to-metro collaboration
- Investment in whole-of-cycle infrastructure that enables access to creation, development, presentation, and touring outcomes.

Without targeted support, regional artists risk stagnation, relocation, or leaving the sector altogether, which has a significant impact on the sustainability of the creative ecosystem in regional Australia.

With Cairns being announced as a co-host city for the 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games, and case studies showing that hosting of the Games can achieve lasting cultural, social, and economic benefits, *Revive* provide a timely opportunity to invest in regional creative development and commissioning of larger scale works as a runway to international presentation opportunities such as the Cultural Olympiad. It ensures we are ready to share our own stories on the global stage, without relying on touring works from metropolitan centres to populate our venues.

Recommendation

Establish a Regional Creative Development and Commissioning Program that:

- Funds multi-year creative development and commissions for emerging, mid-career and established artists based regionally
- Ensures that creative development funding doesn't have to have a presentation outcome – while that may be a long-term outcome, investment in practice development and research is the focus
- Enables regional-to-regional and regional-to-metro collaboration and touring of newly commissioned works
- Prioritises First Nations creative and cultural leadership and storytelling

This investment will ensure that early, mid-career and established regional artists can continue to create, development and contribute to robust cultural ecosystems and strengthen the diversity of Australian cultural identity.

Conclusion

Regional Australia is home to extraordinary creative talent, strong community engagement, and unique cultural identities. Yet without targeted national investment, regional creative ecosystems will continue to face structural disadvantages that limit their potential.

Cairns' *Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022* and resulting report cards provide a compelling case study for how long-term research and planning, strategic investment, community partnership, and First Nations leadership can transform a regional cultural ecosystem.

The National Cultural Policy *Revive* can amplify these successes by embedding regional priorities: strengthening audience development, investing in a skilled creative workforce and First Nations leadership, and enhancing opportunities for regional creative development and commissioning, to ensure sustainable creative careers are possible across Australia.

Through these mechanisms, the National Cultural Policy *Revive* can deliver meaningful, long-term impact for regional communities and ensure that all Australians—regardless of postcode—can participate in and contribute to a vibrant national cultural life.

Appendix A: Background: Strategy, Evaluation and Outcomes

Our *Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022* was developed from consultation with more than 84 community organisations and groups, and over 200 individual participants. It was structured around three priorities:

1. Infrastructure, Resources and Skills – including world-class cultural facilities, creative production spaces, and professional development and capability-building programs

2. Culture, Heritage and Place – celebrating shared identity, protecting cultural heritage, and expanding public art and cultural tourism
3. A Robust Cultural Economy – building an internationally recognised creative hub, large scale creative events that contribute to the local economy, and support for sustainable creative careers.

To evaluate the effectiveness of our delivery against these priorities, a model of embedded longitudinal research through a partnership with James Cook University and CQUniversity provided data-driven insights into sector performance and cultural value. It informed and strengthened the evidence-base and effectiveness of our policy and investment and provided a consistent measure of cultural impact across the life of the strategy.

Despite the significant disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the resulting cost-of-living pressures, the strategy achieved over 90% of its identified goals, delivering substantial outcomes such as increased community participation, the realisation of new cultural infrastructure, regional economic benefits through the delivery of large-scale events, and development of a dynamic creative workforce:

- More than 2 million people attended performances and 38,000 actively participated in creative activities across the region.
- More than 6,000 short term job opportunities and 29 long-term job opportunities were created in the sector.
- Over 1,500 people volunteered their time with an economic worth of over \$1 million.
- Two major venues were opened: the Cairns Performing Arts Centre (2018) and Court House Gallery (2021), with a further gallery (the Mulgrave Gallery) opening in 2024.
- The online arts and culture map (2018) was launched as a central information point for arts and culture activities across the region.
- Our partnership with Arts Queensland on the Regional Arts Development Grant Fund invested over \$2 million in 340 projects.

These achievements align with Cairns' long-term growth planning for the region, with the *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy* emphasising cultural identity, economic diversification, and community wellbeing as essential to a sustainable future, and drivers of future prosperity.

Overall, the 2023 report paints a picture of a culturally vibrant and creative region, but also clear structural gaps, and the need to strengthen audience engagement, creative networks, professional pathways, and First Nations-led approaches.

Addressing these challenges will be essential to realising our vision of being a leading arts and cultural centre in northern Australia and fostering a sustainable creative ecosystem.