

CAIRNS CHILDREN'S FESTIVAL 2026 WRAP-UP

L&C | 79/5/7 | #7897848

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council notes the report.

INTERESTED PARTIES:

Nil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Cairns Children's Festival (CCF) took place on Saturday 16 and Sunday 17 May 2026. The festival was developed and delivered by the Creative Life branch, under the leadership of the Festival team. Programming was presented across four key cultural precincts: Cairns Performing Arts Centre (CPAC), Tanks Arts Centre, Cairns Botanic Gardens, and Cairns City Library.

With a clear emphasis on creativity through participation, accessibility, and a deep connection to place, the festival delivered a vibrant program of 40 performances and activities, drawing an estimated 19,724 attendees—the largest audience in the festival's history.

Audiences were welcomed into a landscape of imagination, play, and discovery, with more than 90% of the program offered free of charge. This ensured children and families from across the region could access high-quality arts and cultural experiences, regardless of background or socio-economic circumstance.

CCF successfully delivered on its objectives to champion creative innovation, support inclusive participation, and celebrate the distinctive environment and community spirit of Cairns, as outlined in this report. The festival recorded substantial growth in attendance, increased the program offering led by young people, and supported the active participation of children, volunteers, creatives and families. This reinforced CCF's position as a cherished event that enhances liveability and social connection, and strengthens the creative identity of the region, further positioning Cairns as a significant cultural hub of Northern Australia.

BACKGROUND:

CCF is Council's premier arts and cultural event for children aged 12 years and under. Established in 2014, the festival has evolved into a key pillar of Council's annual events calendar, expanding each year in creative ambition, attendance, program diversity, and impact.

Designed to cultivate creativity, curiosity, and meaningful connections to both the natural environment and arts practice, CCF provides a unique and welcoming platform for young creatives to express their stories and perspectives, spark their imagination, and engage in experiences that reflect their everyday lives and interests.

CCF 2026 continued to deliver on this aim, presenting an expanded and carefully curated program that amplified the voices and creativity of children, while showcasing both emerging and established artists from across the region.

COMMENT:

The following data provides an overview of CCF's impact and scope, including its programming, audience engagement, and operational delivery.

Audience Attendance:

- 19,724 total attendees approximately (15,301 unique individuals) across the four venues and two-days of the festival. This is an 160% increase since 2015, and 43% increase from 2025, due to a combination of strategic marketing, increased young-person-led programming, and a broad and participatory program offering.
- 7,500 attendees at the Tanks Arts Centre and Botanic Gardens precinct (record numbers)
- 1,733 attendees at the CPAC precinct
- 226 attendees at the Cairns City Library

Ticketed vs Free Programming:

- 36 free events (90% of the programmed events), reinforced CCF's strong focus on accessible and inclusive programming, to enable broad community engagement and participation regardless of economic circumstances.
- 4 ticketed shows providing community exposure to national touring theatre works

Volunteer engagement:

- 45 volunteers in total (up from 35 volunteers in 2025)
- 54 shifts in total
- 222 hours contributed with an economic value of \$9,605 (*)
(*Calculated at the Volunteer Queensland rate of \$43.27 per hour)

Artists, Creatives and Facilitators Participation and Engagement:

- This year's artist and facilitator engagement demonstrated the ongoing commitment to local, inclusive, and youth-led event delivery.
- 257 creatives participated/engaged in total
- 198 were from Far North Queensland
- 160 females / 97 males
- 185 young participants, demonstrating our commitment to fostering young talent and engaging the next generation of artists and creatives.
 - Sorami Ochi's *Dive Deep Down* exhibition had the highest engagement with 112 young creatives participating.
 - screenPLAY involved 50 young people producing 16 short films, which were showcased at CCF.

Program Overview:

- **Saturday 16 May 2026:**

The program was performance-focused, featuring scheduled shows, immersive theatre, and pop-up *Creation Stations*. Activity was concentrated around CPAC and Cairns City Library to deliver innovative, performance-based programming. *The Alphabet of Awesome Science*, *POD*, and *A Night at the Library: The Unwritten Story* all responded to the community's appetite for interactive, immersive, theatrical experiences for the whole family.

- **Sunday 17 May 2026:**

Programming was dispersed across multiple sites—including Tanks Arts Centre, the Promenade, the Botanic Gardens, and surrounding outdoor spaces—to create a vibrant, exploratory festival landscape. This approach encouraged families to move fluidly between indoor and outdoor environments, engaging in both structured and self-directed creative experiences, and moving at their own pace.

The program featured 36 events, including hands-on *Creation Stations* led by local artists, reinforcing CCF's reputation key point of difference in the national children's festival landscape. With a strong emphasis on workshops and creative activities, the program prioritised all-day, interactive experiences that invited children and families to actively participate, rather than passively observe.

The result was a dynamic balance between active and guided participation and relaxed, open-ended play, allowing families to shape their own journey through the festival while remaining deeply connected to place, creativity, and community.

Marketing & Communications:

CCF 2026 delivered a vibrant and highly visible campaign that successfully inspired creativity, curiosity and connection across the CPAC, Tanks Arts Centre and Cairns City Library precincts. Through a strategic mix of publicity, social media, EDMs, competitions, outdoor advertising and community engagement, the campaign built strong awareness from program launch through to festival weekend, driving significant attendance and engagement.

Key highlights included securing Channel 7 News coverage through a targeted two-phase PR strategy, achieving a collective 1.3 million views across social media and YouTube; and delivering high-impact outdoor advertising via digital billboards on Ray Jones Drive and at Cairns Airport. Strategic collaboration played a central role, with an activation delivered in partnership with the Smithfield Library team at the re-opening celebration engaging families through interactive experiences and expanding the festival reach.

Digital content performed strongly, with behind-the-scenes storytelling and the *Tinkering Tanks* reel generating high engagement, while influencer support from artist Hayley Gillespie further amplified visibility. The sold-out success of *A Night at the Library* (6 shows) was leveraged to create booking urgency in the final campaign phase.

Additional initiatives, including child-voiced foyer announcements at CPAC, social media competitions, and targeted EDMs, enhanced the audience experience and maintained consistent engagement, reinforcing the festival's strong connection with the local

community.

Summary:

The success of this year's festival has provided valuable insights to inform future festival planning. A careful balance between scheduled performances and unstructured, self-directed play will remain a key focus, ensuring a dynamic and responsive experience for families. Continued focus on targeted and engaging content—supported by tools such as visual stories—will further empower audiences to chart their own path through the program offering and enhance accessibility across diverse needs and age groups.

There is also an opportunity to build the festival's national profile and branding by promoting the thoughtful, engaging work being delivered by our local artists. Enhanced visual storytelling will strengthen our digital presence, deepen audience engagement, and continue to position Cairns as a significant northern hub for culture and creativity.

OPTIONS:

Option 1: (recommended)

That Council notes the report.

Option 2:

That Council requests officers provide further information.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Council Finance and the Local Economy:

CCF 2026 was funded through the Creative Life 2025/2026 operational budget including the festival budget, and Tanks, CPAC and Cairns Libraries Council Funded Activity budgets.

Cairns Children's Festival 2026 - Income and Expenditure			
	Actuals	Budget	Variance
Revenue			
Mini Makers Markets	\$ 1,714	\$ -	\$ 1,714
Food Vans	\$ 1,210	\$ -	\$ 1,210
Total Revenue	\$ 2,924	\$ -	\$ 2,924
Expenditure			
Employee Costs	\$ 11,398	\$ 28,000	\$ 16,602
Entertainer Services	\$ 67,938	\$ 57,936	\$ (10,002)
Marketing Costs	\$ 27,429	\$ 21,000	\$ (6,429)
Other Materials & Services	\$ 14,771	\$ 20,000	\$ 5,229
Total Expenditure	\$ 121,536	\$ 126,936	\$ 5,400
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 118,612	\$ 126,936	\$ 8,324

There were three ticketed Council Funded Activities held at CPAC and the Cairns City Library during CCF 2026. These event budgets were offset by ticketing revenue, as well as the CCF programming budget.

	POD	The Alphabet of Awesome Science	A Night at the Library
OPERATING INCOME	CPAC	CPAC	CITY LIBRARY
Ticket and Venue Revenue	\$ 6,370	\$ 29,259	\$ 4,520
Bar Revenue	\$ -	\$ 3,767	\$ -
TOTAL INCOME	\$ 6,370	\$ 33,026	\$ 4,520
OPERATING EXPENSES			
Programming Expenses	\$ 18,398	\$ 37,167	\$ 13,703
Bar Expenditure	\$ -	\$ 1,080	\$ -
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 18,398	\$ 38,247	\$ 13,703
NET GAIN/(LOSS)	\$ (12,028)	\$ (5,222)	\$ (9,183)

The investment in CCF2026 through the CFA budgets were offset through savings in programming budgets across the remainder of the financial year.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1: Cairns Children's Festival 2026 Photos

Attachment 2: Cairns Children's Festival 2026 Program and Site Map



Karen Le Roy
Executive Manager Creative Life



Destry Puia
Director, Lifestyle & Community

Attachment 1: Cairns Children's Festival 2026 Photos

Bunktopia (Bunk Puppets) in Tank 3 and Tinkering Tank in Tank 4



Happy Volunteers on the Tanks Promenade



The Magnificent Danny and Dazzle (Arc Theatre) and Mini Makers Market



Neon Space Garden (Dijla Thorpe) in Tank 5



A Night at the Library (Box Jelly Theatre) at the Cairns City Library



POD (Luminous Productions) in the CPAC Studio



The Alphabet of Awesome Science (That Science Gang) in the CPAC Theatre



Attachment 2: Cairns Children's Festival 2026 Program

CCF 2026 Website Program Collateral



SAT 16 MAY

CPAC

CPAC Theatre	Alphabet of Awesome Science (tickets required) 10.00am & 1.00pm
CPAC Studio	POD (tickets required) 9.00am & 12.00pm
CPAC Foyer	Creation Station: Tin Cairns150 ZINE 8.00am - 2.00pm

CAIRNS CITY LIBRARY

Night at the Library: The Unwritten Story
By Box Jelly Theatre Co.
(tickets required)

4.30pm, 5.15pm, 6.00pm, 6.45pm, 7.30pm & 8.15pm





SUN 17 MAY

TANKS ARTS CENTRE

9.00am - 2.00pm

Tank 5	Neon Space Garden
Tank 4	Tinkering Tank: Fish Tank
Tank 4	Dive Deep Down Exhibition
Tank 5 Garden	Creation Station: Neon Space Bugs
Promenade	Mini Makers Markets
Fig Tree	Creation Station: The Violet Flower Garden
Promenade	5 Minutes of Fame Stage
Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre	screenPLAY
Tank 3	BUNKTOPIA by Bunk Puppets 9.30am, 11.20am & 1.10pm

CAIRNS BOTANIC GARDENS

9.00am - 2.00pm

Flecker Lawn	Creation Station: Pūuna Sanctuary
Lawn Opposite Gondwanan Walk	Creation Station: The Teddy Bear Rescue
Flecker Garden	Little Sprouts
Gondwanan	Story Walk: The Gruffalo Walk at your own pace or join a guided adventure at 9.30am, 10.30am, 11.30am & 12.30pm
Evolution Walk	
Flecker Garden	The Magnificent Danny & Dazzle 10.00am & 12.30pm

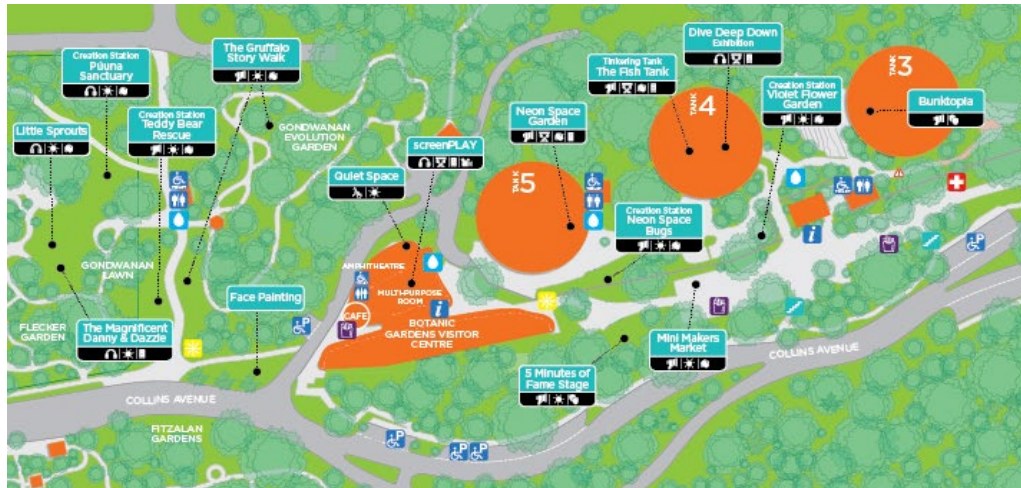


CAIRNS
CHILDREN'S
festival



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Tanks Site Map (Sunday 17 May)



Printed Program (Sunday 17 May)

ALL FREE **SUNDAY 17 MAY 9AM - 2PM** At Tanks Arts Centre & Cairns Botanic Gardens Collins Avenue, Edge Hill

BUNKTOPIA by Bunk Puppets
INTERACTIVE PERFORMANCE
An uplifting and imaginative showcase of puppets for audiences of all ages. Witness the transformation of everyday household objects into evocative and hilarious shadow puppet sketches.
SHOW TIMES: 9.30am, 11.20am & 1.10pm
VENUE: Tank 3

The Magnificent Danny & Dazzle
THEATRE/PLAY
Based on the children's illustrated book The Magnificent Danny & Dazzle, this joyful live play adaptation features a cast from ARC Disability Services Inc.
SHOW TIMES: 10.00am & 12.30pm
VENUE: Flecker Gardens

Neon Space Garden
INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION
Step into the Neon Space Garden, an immersive UV wonderland created especially for curious young explorers. Children are encouraged to look up, reach out and actively engage with their surroundings as they journey through the space.
VENUE: Tank 5

Mini Makers Markets
MARKETS
Run entirely by youth, selling handmade creations from art and jewellery to baked treats, candles, cards and clever little things you didn't know you needed. They've planned it. Tested it. Made it. Priced it. Packed it. Now they're ready to sell it!
VENUE: Tanks Arts Centre - Promenade

TANK 4 TINKERING TANK Fish Tank by Hayley Gillespie
INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION
Fish Tank is a hands-on, imagination-powered tinkering space where children dive into the colourful underwater world of the Great Barrier Reef - right here on the doorstep of Cairns.
DIVE DEEP DOWN curated by Sorami Ochi
EXHIBITION
Children from our region were invited to imagine the unseen underwater world in all its weird, wonderful and watery glory. The result is a joyful, surprising and delightfully imaginative exhibition. Dive in and discover the ocean as only kids can imagine it.

ALL FREE **SUNDAY 17 MAY 9AM - 2PM** At Tanks Arts Centre & Cairns Botanic Gardens Collins Avenue, Edge Hill

CREATION STATIONS
Artists, inventors, tinkerers, and creative thinkers were invited to develop and facilitate a Creation Station activity that encourages children to explore, play, discover and create.
INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES
Neon Space Bugs by DILJA THORPE
Kids will dream up and design a wildly wonderful cosmic critter using colourful fabrics, pom-poms, foam balls, pipe cleaners and all the crafty bits you'd usually find rolling around at home.
VENUE: Tanks Arts Centre - Tank 5 Garden
Pūna Sanctuary by LIA PA'APA'Ā
Pūna Santuary offers a vibrant, culturally grounded creative space for bubs and their families. Children are invited to explore, create, rest, express and belong.
VENUE: Cairns Botanic Gardens - Flecker Lawn
The Teddy Bear Rescue by AMBER GROSSMANN
Choose a preloved teddy bear or bring your own, learn simple age-appropriate repair tricks and give your furry friend a brand-new lease on life.
VENUE: Cairns Botanic Gardens - Lawn Opposite Gondwanan Walk
The Violet Flower Garden by JESSICA RASTOKA
Wander among towering blooms, spot our charming scarecrow, and meet our friendly gardeners, decorate your own biodegradable cane cup and plant an Ivy Leaf Violet to take home.
VENUE: Tanks Arts Centre - Fig Tree

5 Minutes of Fame Stage
INTERACTIVE PERFORMANCE
We've got the lights, the sound, the costumes, and the crowd, all we're missing is you! Whether you're a pint-sized magician, a future pop star, or a master of the dramatic hair flip, this is YOUR moment to shine.
VENUE: Tanks Arts Centre - Promenade
Little Sprouts
INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY
Kids will twist, loop, bend and weave coconut palm fronds into playful creatures, bringing the wonders of nature to life.
VENUE: Cairns Botanic Gardens - Flecker Garden
screenPLAY
FILM SCREENING
Step into a cinematic adventure screening the freshest creations from Cairns' rising young filmmakers. Lights down. Aircon on. Volume up. Let the show begin!
VENUE: Botanic Garden Visitor Centre - Multi-purpose Room
Storywalk: The Gruffalo
INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY
Step into the forest with The Gruffalo! Before you set off, visit the pop-up library space to make your own Gruffalo headband, play Pin the Wart on the Gruffalo and take part in a scavenger hunt.
VENUE: Cairns Botanic Gardens - Gondwanan Evolution Walk
Walk at your own pace or join a guided adventure at 9.30am, 10.30am, 11.30am & 12.30pm