

National Cultural Policy Submission

Name: Byron Writer's Festival

Submission: 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?

First Nations

In our view, the following aspects are critical opportunities for building stronger First Nations participation:

1. Targeted funding and investment in programs to foster First Nations authors and storytelling into the literary lifecycle, such as workshops, mentorships, editorial programs and pathways to publication.
2. Targeted funding and professional development pathways for First Nations peoples to be fostered into literary sector infrastructure roles such as editors, publishers, literary programmers and curators.
3. Funding for Indigenous led programs that showcase First Nations voices and perspectives.
4. Targeted funding for First Nations children and youth to engage with and attend literary programming and reading and writing events.
5. Fostering opportunities for First Nations communities to attend literary events.
6. Providing guidance to organisations on ensuring First Nations people are embedded and supported appropriately and with cultural awareness to deliver within their roles at all levels of an organisation's operations from governance to operational delivery.

A Place for Every Story

In our view, the following aspects are critical opportunities for building stronger diversity within literary programming:

1. Targeted funding and investment in programs to foster diverse authors and storytelling into the literary lifecycle, such as workshops, mentorships, editorial programs and pathways to publication.
2. Targeted funding and professional development pathways for diverse peoples to be fostered into literary sector infrastructure roles such as editors, publishers, literary programmers and curators.
3. Funding for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) led programs that showcase diverse voices and perspectives.
4. Targeted funding for diverse children and youth to engage with and attend or access literary programming and reading and writing events.
5. Fostering opportunities for diverse communities to attend or access literary events.
6. Providing support to organisations on how best to provide access for people living with a disability.

The Centrality of the Artist

Support for artists is critical, particularly in allowing time for the development and gestation of new works. Authors are the lowest paid artists in Australia and many struggle with opportunities to dedicate themselves to their work. We see the following as being a priority:

1. Supporting authors alongside other artists to dedicate their time and energies to their craft. A key aspect of this should be in considering a living wage or ongoing funding for individuals to remove the uncertainty around income for authors.
2. Ensuring infrastructure is in place to facilitate the evolution of an author's career and professional development including access to workshops, mentorships and guidance on pathways to publication.
3. Providing support for programs that facilitate access to audiences and readers for authors. Many publishers no longer support authors with extensive marketing investment, particularly authors who are emerging. This leaves authors to arrange their own marketing and promotional activity.
4. As a regional organisation we see the need for authors from regional areas to be supported to engage with publishers and other industry figures such as agents, editors and peak bodies. Festivals are a great opportunity for this to occur as are other more targeted programs that can be facilitated through regional writers centres.
5. Finally, we see scope for exploration around the celebration of artists and authors in Australia. During the pandemic so many turned to books and reading to sustain themselves during lockdowns and periods of isolation. Yet many in the sector felt completely undervalued during this period without access to income supports as other Australians received. How can we place a higher value on the arts and literature in Australia in a cultural sense? Awards and scholarships are an important function of recognition and support but other more publicly accessible modes of celebrating our culture makers could be considered.

Strong Institutions

We see the following aspects as critical to building a strong literary sector:

1. Adequate funding for festivals and literary events. Events and festivals provide essential opportunities for authors to reach new audiences and deepen their relationships with existing readers. They also provide an invaluable opportunity for readers and audiences to connect with others who are interested in literature and ideas. Festivals and events contribute greatly to the national conversation and the building of our culture through debate and ideas exchange. They are a critical aspect of our public square. Further, in disaster-affected regional areas (such as ours), festivals and arts events play a critical role in creative recovery and community resilience.
2. Consideration of governance and board structures for arts organisations. The roles and responsibilities of arts boards and the qualifications for participation on those boards has scope for review.
3. Consultation and engagement between government and philanthropists. Private investment in the arts is critical for its ongoing vitality and philanthropy in particular has the capacity to result in powerful outcomes for the arts. However, investment opportunities for regional arts organisations are limited compared to their metropolitan counterparts. It is therefore recommended that a deeper understanding of arts philanthropy in regional Australia is developed by government, in particular in understanding the aspects of work that philanthropists are willing to invest and the foundations that need to exist or be strengthened to enhance the opportunities for giving.

Reaching the Audience

Australians in regional areas are less likely to attend a festival (38%) than those in metro areas (48%). While this may reflect that festivals in cities are more accessible to more Australians, festivals in regional Australia are drivers for regional tourism, including intrastate overnight trips

(Australia Council, 2017). Therefore, regional festivals need to be supported in reaching and attracting audiences.

Three key challenges face arts organisations in the small to medium sector as follows:

1. Retaining existing audiences is challenging for festivals in the post pandemic landscape. Many older Australians have switched to digital access for their content and entertainment, which has led to a slower uptake in participation in talks and ideas events.
2. Reaching new audiences has proven challenging given the impact of COVID and in our region, flooding events, on planning timelines and resource focus.
3. The fracturing of the media landscape is difficult for smaller organisations working with tight resources to address.

Opportunities lie at the policy level to invest in and support small to medium organisations to deepen their understanding of audiences and how to reach them through evidence-based practices and digital expertise. This could be achieved by expanding sector access to professional development and funding for audience research projects.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why.

First Nations

Byron Writer's Festival is committed to placing First Nations voices at the centre of what we do. Our approach to this is threefold.

First, we work to ensure First Nations authors and storytellers are featured across our events. A key aspect that would enhance our approach is targeted funding that would enable us to employ First Nations curators and feature more Indigenous authors across our programs.

Second, we are seeking to provide opportunities and pathways for First Nations communities to engage with and attend our programs and activities. Most of our events are ticketed and we are conscious that ticket prices can be a barrier to broadening First Nations participation. Under our current model we rely on ticket income to sustain our events.

Third we are building our capacity to include First Nations people in our governance and operations structures. We are acutely aware of the need to create a dedicated role for First Nations programming in order to ensure appropriate practices around curation are in place and to play our role in fostering First Nations people into creative industry career pathways. A key challenge in achieving this is the limited funding we have for resourcing and personnel.

A Place for Every Story

Byron Writers Festival is committed to diversity and ensuring authors from CALD communities have strong representation across our programs and activities. A key area of development for us in future is in how we can provide better access to people living with a disability to experience and benefit from our programs.

The Centrality of the Artist

Byron Writer's Festival plays a critical role in supporting local authors and writers through a comprehensive program of year-round workshops and mentorships. We also provide an important platform for emerging and established authors to reach new and existing readers and audiences and to earn income through appearance fees. This role is particularly important given artists living in the regions earn almost a third less for their creative work than their counterparts in metro areas (Australia Council, 2017).

Strong Institutions

Byron Writer's Festival plays an important role in the literary ecosystem by providing opportunities for authors and writers as outlined above.

We are also a significant arts organisation within the Northern Rivers region of NSW, contributing to a vibrant cultural life in this area for local community and in the visitor economy for NSW.

Reaching the Audience

Byron Writer's Festival benefits from an established and loyal following. However, much has changed in our region over the last three years due to COVID, natural disasters (fire, flood), the rental crisis and cost-of-living pressures. We are now in a position to deepen our understanding of our audiences and scope strategically for new audiences to prioritise and foster across our region and beyond.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

In light of the pandemic and climate change, we would like to see the following issues addressed in the National Cultural Policy:

1. Cost of living and its impact on creative communities. Many traditional centres of creativity (urban and regional hubs, including Byron Bay) are being impacted by the rise in the cost of living. This is impacting creative communities as artists and arts workers are being forced to move to different areas to work and live. As an organisation that pays authors to deliver live cultural services in the form of presentations and workshops we are conscious of our capacity to pay fair rates for our activities. Unfortunately, the cost of living pressure is also impacting ticket sales so this is not an issue that is easily rectified by passing on costs to our audiences (particularly given the effects of recent natural disasters on our local communities).
2. Insurance for live events. As a festival we have been directly impacted by several cancellations due to COVID and more recently due to flood events in our region. Even in exploring event cancellation insurance options for our event we have been unable to secure an insurer to provide us with this insurance due to recent weather events. What policy settings can be put in place to support arts events as we weather the impact of major weather events and health orders on our activities?
3. More generally on creative culture in Australia we would like to see some policy settings that allow for deeper thinking, long form creative development and higher risk taking across the arts sector. The current resource tight and outcomes focused environment lead too often to quite safe creative choices. What would our culture look like if artists and arts organisations were invited to think big, dare greatly and raise the bar of our creative culture?