



National Cultural Policy Submission

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Secretary
National Cultural Policy Review
Office of the Arts
Department of Infrastructure, Transport
Regional Development and the Arts
Canberra

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review

Dear Secretary

The Yuin Folk Club Inc wishes the attached document be considered as its submission to the development of the 2022 National Cultural Policy.

The Yuin Folk Club is a not-for-profit, volunteer-run incorporated association based in Cobargo. The Club has produced the annual Cobargo Folk Festival for 25 years. A medium-sized volunteer-run event, the Cobargo Folk Festival is recognised as a NSW tourism Flagship Event.

The festival is renowned locally, nationally and internationally for the quality of its artistic program, its contribution to regional cultural activity, for its support of Australian and international performers, and for its contribution to the regional economy, community connectedness and the overall wellbeing of the Cobargo and Far South Coast community.

We are happy to talk further to our submission and for it to be made public, attributed to the Yuin Folk Club Inc.

Yours sincerely

Peter Logue
President
Yuin Folk Club Inc
Cobargo

Zena Armstrong
Director
Cobargo Folk Festival

A Renewed National Cultural Policy Submission from the Yuin Folk Club Inc, Cobargo, NSW

This submission provides a community perspective about the importance of a national cultural policy that includes strong support for rural and regional communities. A truly equitable and respectful National Cultural Policy would recognise regional Australia as the source of rich, and increasingly diverse, cultural and artistic practices that contribute to shaping our national identity and story.

A respectful national arts policy with practical, well-funded support for cultural activity beyond the city edge will provide multiple benefits to regional communities. A living, breathing regional cultural sector energises and provides new skills for our young people, ensures vitality in our townships and villages, and fosters connected communities that have the relationships and tools to face an increasingly uncertain future with hope and a creative, collaborative mindset.

This submission is prepared by the Yuin Folk Club, producers of the Cobargo Folk Festival, a medium sized folk festival that has been held over the past 26 years in Cobargo, on the NSW Far South Coast. This region was severely affected by the Black Summer Bushfires. Pre-bushfires and Covid, the Yuin Folk Club also produced regular music concerts in the area.

Our submission reflects our recent experiences of a major disaster and the importance of art and culture in supporting our recovery. It looks at how regional cultural activity does much more than simply entertain. Increased support for the development of the regional cultural sector will provide a much more rounded picture of modern Australia. It will also speed the development of the enabling environment that helps cultivate innovative thinking, nurture community belonging and build lasting social capital.

Our response to the five pillars is woven throughout the submission but we have chosen not to address them independently of each other. Our submission instead offers a grassroots perspective that attempts to illustrate how a well-supported regional cultural sector encourages unique cultural voices, catalyses innovative thinking, bolsters collaborative practices and encourages stronger, more connected communities.

For a rigorous academic exposition of the benefits of a National Cultural Policy that embraces and prioritises rural and regional cultural practice, we commend Lindy Hume's 2021 PhD thesis "A Bigger Picture: toward a landscape-oriented arts practice". Lindy's thesis provides a fine foundation for an equitable National Cultural Policy that benefits all.

Culture, social capital and community resilience

In Cobargo, we are now over two and a half years into the long process of recovering from the bushfires that destroyed so much of the eastern seaboard.

The work the community is doing to get back on its feet has brought home to us the enormous **social capital** generated by regional cultural events like the Cobargo Folk Festival. The active involvement of so many festival volunteers and supporters in the relief, recovery and rebuild of Cobargo is a clear demonstration of the extent to which events like the Cobargo Folk Festival contribute to the social capital and resilience of regional communities, to building overall community connectedness and social wellbeing.

Many of our core festival volunteers have been, and continue to be, closely involved in ongoing bushfire relief and recovery efforts.

Their skills and experience in event and project management, not-for-profit governance, financial management, production and community engagement is proving to be of great value in supporting Cobargo's recovery.

The success of our festival relies upon close cooperation with other volunteer community groups, and on the goodwill and support of the local community more broadly. The work done in nurturing volunteerism, in maintaining networks across the community, together with well-established habits of cooperation and trusted relationships, have proven to be invaluable assets in recovery.

The festival's many supporters - performers, audience, stallholders, suppliers, other folk festivals and folk clubs in Australia and overseas - have rallied around Cobargo in the aftermath of the fire.

Thousands of acts of kindness from artists, performers and festival supporters in Australia and around the world have helped lift the spirits of the many traumatised people in our area.

Despite the many personal challenges faced by musicians and artists as a result of Covid, this group still managed to contribute a very significant portion of the almost \$800,000 raised by the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund Inc. for community recovery. Artists and performers across Australia held numerous fundraisers for Cobargo and we are very grateful for this support.

These donations have funded more than 50 community-led projects with more to come. They provided the seed funding for all the community-led applications to the NSW Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund and the Black Summer grants, securing more than \$20 million for Cobargo's main street rebuild and other economic recovery and resilience projects. The rebuilding now underway in the main street of Cobargo would not have got off the ground without the generosity of many in the cultural sector.

Cultural practice and healthy communities

Much has been spoken and written about the contribution of a vibrant cultural practice to community health and wellbeing. Our lived experience in post-bushfire Cobargo has amply demonstrated this.

The Yuin Folk Club recognises the power and place of art and culture in community recovery. The Club established the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund with three other Cobargo community groups, partly because we wanted to ensure that we had funds at hand to support community arts projects.

The fund is supporting the work of many local artists, writers, performers, musicians, filmmakers and other creative workers, who are helping our communal recovery from this disaster. Village murals, community painting projects, sculpture and theatre projects are in progress or have been completed, and the fund has committed to a major public art component in the main street redevelopment.

These projects are drawing together artists and residents in joyful activity, restoring our morale and confidence, brightening our village (which two years on is still yet to start its rebuild) and giving us hope for the future.

Many musicians have used their art to address the trauma of the bushfires. Several who wrote new work were invited to perform at the 2022 festival in a concert of healing and gratitude.

Such activities help us to heal, whilst further shaping Cobargo as a place that celebrates who we are as a community with all our quirks, our grit, our feistiness and our creativity, as well as providing us with beautiful spaces for gatherings, meetings, and simply to sit.

Regional cultural activities and the national dialogue

We would like to make special mention of the contribution of regional cultural activity to the national dialogue on contemporary issues, including First Nations recognition, climate change, refugees and migration.

The Cobargo Folk Festival hosts a wide-ranging discussion program each year, encouraging people to engage respectfully and with good intent. The Festival endorsed the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2019. We are working with its First Nations Program Coordinator, Yuin knowledge-holder Warren Ngarrae Foster, to give meaning to this endorsement through our festival music, dance and spoken word program. Music, art and story sharing are essential, yet underutilised, pathways to understanding. At our most recent festival, we created an Elders' space for the sharing and exchange of stories, song and culture, holding space for honest and authentic conversations.

The economic benefits to a low socio-economic community

In 2016, the Bega Valley was ranked the 72nd most economically disadvantaged Local Government Area in NSW out of 130 LGAs. [[Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas \(SEIFA\)](#), a product developed by the ABS that ranks areas in Australia]

At a time when employment opportunities for arts and cultural practitioners and industry support services have declined dramatically, the paid gigs provided by regional arts and music festivals are more important than ever.

We urge the Federal Government to look beyond a “one-size-fits-all” approach and recognise the enormous diversity between festivals.

Our independent folk festival, though relatively small when compared to commercial music festivals, promotes artistic excellence and creativity, encouraging original work. Many successful artists, including The Waifs, Bega Valley guitarist, Daniel Champagne and Melbourne singer-songwriter Kerryn Fields, began their careers at small folk festivals. Small festivals also offer exposure and a pathway for emerging artists to perform at bigger events, including Woodford Folk Festival and the National Folk Festival.

And it’s not all about concert performances – we promote collaborative projects where we bring together international and national artists to encourage artistic exchange and sharing. We also prioritise community music-making. Our philosophy is that everyone has a right to creative self-expression and we work hard to create spaces where people can be inspired and encouraged in creative pursuits.

Regrettably, the contribution of small and medium-sized festivals to the cultural sector is rarely acknowledged by arts funding bodies as culturally or artistically significant and worthy of funding support. Our events are often viewed at best as retail tourism attractors or, at worst, quaint local vanities run by well-meaning amateurs. Arts funding is hard to come by.

But even in economic terms the contribution is not insignificant: Destination NSW has estimated the festival’s total annual contribution to the regional economy, including flow-on benefits, at close to \$2m. In 2019, we contracted more than 60 local, national and international acts, amounting to around 180 paid performers.

We provide employment opportunities and income for a range of contractors, tradespeople, suppliers and merchant traders including but not limited to tent, stage, sound and lighting and equipment hire providers, security, photographers and videographers, managers and booking agents, professional services, market stall and food vendors.

We provide professional development opportunities and training for our volunteers in event management, security and risk planning, not-for-profit governance, event production, construction and staging, sound and digital, and waste management. This work is helping build skills and capacity in an under-serviced region that does not have many opportunities for training in these areas.

We put back into the local community through our program of grants and donations, supporting capital improvements to community owned assets in Cobargo village and support for community music and artistic development, particularly for young musicians in the Bega Valley.

Threats to the regional creative and cultural sector

Bushfires and Covid-19 are the types of extreme natural disasters that have potential to disrupt the regional cultural sector in the years ahead. These conditions are especially disruptive to the events sector.

In 2020 and 2021 we cancelled two festivals and one large-scale fundraising concert because of fires and Covid.

This year we returned with a smaller, Covid-safe festival but this would not have been possible without grant support from the NSW Government and other funders. Grant funding is a whole other can of worms - obtaining grant funding, producing reports and acquittals is time consuming; grant objectives are often very narrowly cast with little flexibility to accommodate local circumstances; processes are duplicative and cumbersome even for very modest amounts of money.

As others will have noted, festival production costs - temporary infrastructure, freight, transport and compliance costs - have skyrocketed, as have performer fees. These costs are not easily passed on to the consumer in economically disadvantaged regional areas.

In addition, a high degree of volunteer fatigue is evident. Successive disasters, Covid-related pressures, the impact of rising costs on shrinking home budgets and other unusual stressors are showing up in declining volunteer numbers.

The unpredictability of Covid continues to present serious challenges for the financial sustainability of regional festivals.

Pandemic-risk and compliance measures may be required for a long time yet - we may never be free of them. Given these new uncertainties, without government support many regional events will fail. The loss to regional communities will be significant.

The devastating impact of Covid on our artists and musicians is a further concern.

Musicians have been knocked sideways by Covid. Many are just giving up and leaving behind years of hard work dedicated to developing their skills. Australia's pool of artistic talent is declining.

Many young people with promising musical lives ahead of them are making the hard decision not to take up a career in music.

This diminishing of so many unique Australian voices is a national tragedy.

One part of a solution here may be more direct grants for musicians and artists from all genres to support artistic development and new works.

Covid restrictions have meant that many international acts are thinking twice about coming to Australia, a situation which may continue for some time yet. Artistic programs are featuring more

local and national acts. This is a very welcome development if Australian artists can be provided with the resources to step up.

For further insights into the concerns of musicians we commend Ruth Hazleton's submission to this review.

Government support for the regional cultural sector

As an organisation deeply committed to encouraging artistic and cultural practice for all, we would like to see our national government show respect and support for Australian art and culture.

Like others, we are advocating for increased funding and a more systematic approach to government support for the Australian cultural sector, especially in regional areas.

We would like to see our national government acknowledge and appreciate the broad social benefits of a dynamic, publicly-funded cultural sector, and take the necessary steps to revitalise Australian culture and share the benefits for all.

This respect for culture has been sadly, deplorably, missing over the past decade.

We are living in increasingly challenging times. Regional Australia has its own stories to tell about our infinitely complex lives. It's our musicians, artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, dancers, performers and many other creators who help us do this, who help us make sense of the world around us. Now, more than ever, we need a vibrant, inclusive, cultural sector that encourages flexible and agile minds capable of innovative thinking to help us understand and address the many challenges we are confronting.

In cold economic terms, recent studies show that Australia's cultural and creative activity contributed \$115.8 billion to the economy in 2018–19. Festivals contribute some \$2.7 billion to GDP. Add to that the immeasurable benefits that music, art and culture bring to social well-being and connectedness -- we are a sector that not only needs but merits the kind of support given to other industries.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the review.

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