



National Cultural Policy. Submission. August 22, 2022.

Question 1.

This submission is from Arena Theatre Company, a not-for-profit arts organisation.

Question 2. Responding to Pillars 2 and 4.

Arena Theatre Company makes live performance *for and with* children and young people in the Central Victorian city of Bendigo. Our vision is to empower every young person through creativity.

The value of young peoples' participation in the arts to the community is profound and multifaceted, as demonstrated by local and international research. There is an urgent opportunity to extend the reach and impact of these benefits to all young Australians, especially those living regionally.

Conversely, the cost of not investing in the cultural lives of young Australians may be great, aspects of which may already be evident in the disturbing mental health outcomes of our children and young people.

Funding to increase young people's participation in the arts must be significantly increased immediately.

Arena Theatre is the only professional theatre company specialising in performance for young audiences in regional Victoria. We directly experience the effects that Covid, rural living, resettlement, and a de-stabilised world is having on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

We listen to the stories of the people in our region. We tell the stories of the people in our region. We take those stories to the rest of Australia and beyond.

Hearing stories helps children and young people to forge connection with their community. They better understand our collected experiences and shared histories.

Telling stories empowers children and young people to see themselves as active and essential members of the community. Young people in regional areas need to know their voices matter, their opinions are valued, and their experiences carry weight.

Arena works with and for ALL children and young people, including First Nations, migrants and refugees, people living with a disability, and LGBTIQ+ communities. Storytelling and performance are our most effective tools for celebrating contrasting experiences and building pride in our communities. It bridges divides - generational, cultural, and physical.

The findings of Australian and International research clearly articulate the benefits of participation in arts and cultural projects for young people through:

- An increase in wellbeing including resilience and the ability to overcome challenges¹
- An improvement in self-esteem, sense of self-worth and sense of belonging¹
- A reduction in mental health stigma against young people, and greater likelihood to seek treatment⁶
- An improvement across all areas of curriculum learning², and
- An increased willingness to participate in community activities such as volunteering and voting³

Australian children and young people critically require these interventions. Recent reports including the 2021 Mission Australia Youth Survey and the 2022 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, paint a picture of young Australians suffering anxiety, depression, and mental illness.



ABS data for Arena's hometown of Bendigo, indicate that the proportion of people suffering from mental health issues is well above the average for Victoria. The Australian Psychological Society has stated that the issue is compounded by a lack of treatment services compared to capital cities.⁴

Australia needs a National Cultural Policy that better supports ALL our children and young people, wherever they are living. Every \$1 spent on participation in the arts can save \$7 in costs for treatment of ill-health.⁵ These are the opportunities before us.

If there is a place for every story then that place must include Regional Australia. And those stories must be told *for* and *with* the diversity of ALL young people. The organisations that supply these very services have seen a systemic decline in funding and are themselves at risk. Increased resources must be allocated immediately.

Strong Institutions

Strong institutions recognise their purpose and have fit-for-purpose structures to achieve their goals.

Arena creates high quality arts experiences *for, with and by young people* in multiple contexts in the service of our community.

For example, workshops in regional schools can generate powerful impacts by working in small groups. By contrast, public performances shared by hundreds of people at a time, that tour widely empower our children and young people in a completely different way.

For children and young people in regional areas, knowing that the art made *with* them, in *their* town, is also valued by the rest of the country and the world is profoundly empowering. Arena's Helpmann Award winning Robot Song demonstrated to Bendigo's children and young people that a show made by *their* company could be regarded as the best Australia has to offer.

By participating in art at multiple levels, children and young people feel connected and valued in their own communities, their state, their country and beyond. But it is not just about art and culture: the research demonstrates that increased participation in the arts leads to increased participation *throughout* society.¹

It is a challenge for small institutions to find resources to serve their communities and be part of national and international culture. Young People's Arts companies are already unsustainably stretched beyond their capacities.

The real power and the most profound impacts for communities in regional areas come from creating connections *both within and without*. The urgent opportunity is to increase resources dedicated to building strong, sustainable, culturally rich local communities that are *connected to other communities* around the country and around the world.

Question 3. Responding to Pillars 1, 3 and 5.

First Nations

Arena Theatre Company and the City of Bendigo is situated on the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungarong peoples.

Upon moving to Bendigo 5 years ago, we commenced Cultural Training through the Dja Dja Wurrung Corporation, before collaborating with First Nations artists, before bringing on First Nations artists to lead projects.

Arena's artistic practice is transforming as our understanding of our place on this land transforms. Our deepening relationship with First Nations artists and elders influences which stories we tell, how we tell those stories, and where we tell those stories. Fostering connection to place gives children and young people a greater sense of belonging, and a greater sense of collective responsibility and pride that permeates all aspects of life.

The Centrality of The Artist

Artists have a unique responsibility to reflect the past and present, and to imagine our society's potential futures. At Arena, we uphold this responsibility by giving artists the platform, the resources and skills development.

We believe in the concept of the Arts as a professional industry, and the necessity to provide appropriate pay, sustainable career paths, and safe workplace conditions just like any other industry.

We revel in the extraordinary things that only artists can do. Not merely for its own sake, but for the sake of how this inspires and empowers our young audience. We encourage our artists to pursue the impossible, to reveal the invisible, and to empathise with the unthinkable – as a model for our young audience to do the same in all aspects of their lives

5. Reaching our audience.

Arena Theatre places children and young people at the centre of everything we do. New technologies play a significant role in our thinking in two ways: -

1. As *creative tools* to ignite our audience's imaginations - incorporating Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Live Motion Capture, among many other innovations.
2. As the means to re-ignite our audience's connection with community and culture. Regional centres have greater barriers for children engaging with creative projects. Technology helps us to dissolve some of these barriers.

4. What is required within the Cultural Plan.

Our Key Recommendations:

1. Include "Young People's Engagement" as a priority of the Culture Policy with Young People's Arts being included into whole of government approaches to learning, wellbeing, mental health, employment, resilience, and artistic excellence so that ALL government departments are incentivised to understand the full scope of ways Arts can deliver social outcomes.
2. Re-establish an ongoing funding stream for Young People's Arts and investment in companies whose *core business* is young people's engagement, sufficient to allow growth and enhanced impact, to be administered by the Australia Council for the Arts.
3. Establish a separate stream of funding for Young People's engagement and participation to be made available to Health, Employment, and the Arts, co-managed by the Australia Council, to development and implement specialised programs.
4. Establish Young People's Advisory Committees that reflect the diversity of young Australians, managed independently, as an ongoing standing committee for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts, ensuring young Australians have a direct voice to the decisionmakers impacting their lives.

References:

1. Davies, Christina, and Melanie Pescud. *The Arts and Creative Industries in Health Promotion: an Evidence Check Rapid Review brokered by the Sax Institute for The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.* (2020).
2. Catterall. *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art.* The AEP Wire. (March 2009).
3. Catterall, Dumais and Hampden-Thompson. *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies.* US National Endowment for the Arts, Research Report #55. (March 2012.)
4. *Bendigo's distress: region suffering some of the worst mental health in Victoria.* Bendigo Advertiser, 23rd (July, 2022.)
5. McGrath, Richard, and Kristen Stevens. *Forecasting the social return on investment associated with children's participation in circus-arts training on their mental health and well-being.* International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure 2.1 (2019): 163-193.
6. Gaiha, Shivani Mathur, et al. *Effectiveness of arts interventions to reduce mental-health-related stigma among youth: a systematic review and meta-analysis.* BMC psychiatry 21.1 (2021): 1-26.