

Writers SA
Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation
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Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

About Writers SA

Writers SA is South Australia's home of writing and literature. We are a not-for-profit membership-based organisation that aims to foster, develop and promote writers and a national culture of literature. As the state's only organisation dedicated to literature, we take our responsibility to our members seriously. We are one of the largest employers of writers in the state, providing opportunities for artistic development and reader engagement. We improve access for the broader South Australian community through our statewide regional programs, targeted initiatives with First Nations writers and Deaf writers, and the delivery of free literary events in partnership with local councils. Established in 1985, Writers SA was the first writers' centre in Australia and continues to raise the profile of South Australian writers through ambitious literary projects.

This submission has been prepared by Jessica Alice, Chief Executive Officer of Writers SA.

Australian literature in crisis

As told by the extraordinary number of contributions by writers to the 2020 parliamentary inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions, Australian literature is in crisis. Literature receives the least public funding of any art form (just 2.7% federally) and writers earn among the least of all artists, averaging \$12,900 per year (Macquarie University). A long decline in funding and a lack of literary policy has led us to a place where only the wealthy can afford a career as a writer or literary arts worker, and organisations struggle to keep the lights on through short funding cycles. Scarcity – of public funds and of policy – entrenches inequality and diminishes capacity for experimentation and ambition. It impoverishes writers themselves, and the reading public who go wanting for an emboldened Australian literary culture.

The elements of literary production may not be visible like the tools and equipment in the making of music or visual art but the work of writing is significant, defined largely in terms of time, for both creative research and the writing itself. Books, though not often staged in theatres or galleries, involve a long line of production, from the many processes of publishing and the dark arts of book promotion. The way a piece of literature finds its way into a reader's heart, and how a reader is developed at all, is drawn through an ecology of literary institutions, education, publications, media and festivals.

Within a national cultural policy, we urgently require a national plan for literature. This must encompass an increase in overall funding for literature, initiatives to provide secure employment and conditions for writers to create new work, long term funding models for literary organisations, and recognition of this literary ecosystem. Fundamentally, Australia's needs a Ministry for Culture to achieve the level of reform required across cultural policy as a whole and within specific art forms such as literature.

First Nations first

Writers SA supports the centrality of First Nations arts and culture in a new national cultural policy, and within a national plan for literature. Such a plan must include increased, targeted support for First Nations writers, literary organisations – such as the First Nations Writers Australia Network (FNAWN) – and programs. The black&write! Writing Fellowship is a ripe example of a successful, holistic initiative that is transforming the publishing industry through mentorship of both authors and editors.

In addition to First Nations specific initiatives, First Nations knowledge provides rich models for all in the arts ecology for caring for country and community, new models for governance and accountability, and approaches to truth telling and justice.

A place for every story

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights – to which Australia is a signatory – asserts that cultural rights are human rights. Everyone is entitled to a literary education, to pursue literary expression and participate in literary experiences like reading and festivals.

A national plan for literature must include writers placed in our public institutions – schools, libraries, aged care centres – on paid residencies to make new work, develop literacy, and make the role of the writer visible.

Tertiary education in literature is becoming increasingly unattainable. Many vocational courses have disappeared through years of cuts to TAFE, and price hikes for humanities degrees are locking out aspiring writers and literary academics. This cannot go unacknowledged in the development of a national cultural plan and the university sector urgently needs reform. In the meantime, writers centres often fill a skills and training gap, as well as offering unique literary education and pathways to industry.

Writers centres have an invaluable bridging relationships between writers and publishers, offering creative development and formal mentorship for writers, and courses for marginalised writers and targeted groups, such as regional writers, First Nations writers, migrants, and young people, led by leaders in the industry. Writers centres operate with a statewide remit – indeed, Writers SA employs literary event coordinators in three regional locations – and are connected via the National Writers Centre Network. However, these organisations subsist on scant resources and short funding cycles.

Long term funding for these significant statewide organisations will enable more accessible non-parchment based training, and improve capacity to reach farther and connect states.

The centrality of the artist

Significant work must be undertaken to improve the conditions of Australia's writers, who are among our most precariously employed workers. A national cultural policy must acknowledge interdependencies with other areas of public policy, such as housing and childcare. Economic pressures, the rental crisis, and the 'cost of living' crisis, in combination

with some of the lowest earnings in any industry, increasingly mean artists have little housing stability and are forced to juggle multiple jobs to pay the bills, with no time left to create.

A national plan for literature must include innovative approaches to writer employment, such as large scale, well-funded fellowship programs for creative development, and bold new policies such as a basic income for artists, such as that being trialled by the Government of Ireland. A national plan must include affordable housing for artists, raising the rate of social security payments and ditching 'mutual obligations'.

Institutions such as writers centres and libraries with the existing systems and infrastructure to offer residencies, fellowships and other forms of writer employment should be supported with greater resources to do so.

Strong institutions

Literature – like the broader arts and culture – must be understood as an ecosystem. Within it are our primary creators – writers – and the institutions that support them and their audience of readers. These include the not-for-profit sector, semi-commercial and commercial publishing sector and commercial book retailers. Every element of the ecosystem is crucial to the artistic development of writers, the development of cultural literacy and a literary public – and public engagement with literature. However, years of austerity have undermined Australia's efforts to build a sophisticated literary culture.

In order to redress the decades-long decline in literary funding and restore the capacity of our literary institutions, a national plan for literature must include new six-year funding terms for established literary organisations, as well as access to infrastructure and capital works funding to improve our event and residency spaces. Such funding initiatives would provide the stability and security to encourage greater ambition, strategic experimentation and cross-sector collaboration for the benefit of writers and readers.

Reaching the audience

All parts of the literary ecosystem are involved in reaching our audience, and a national plan for literature must recognise the breadth of literary presenters – writer centres, libraries, booksellers, publishers, festivals, and broadcast media.

The development of both writers and readers begins in schools. Writers in schools programs, teen writers programs as delivered by institutions like Writers SA, and free literary programming in libraries and other public institutions are a crucial first step in ensuring all young people can access literature and a literary imagination.

After a decade of funding decline and policy neglect, cultural audiences have suffered too. This moment is an opportunity to introduce new policy for cultural production, and to place culture back within the public sphere. A dedicated Ministry of Culture would have the remit to undertake an ambitious cultural reset. To build audiences, we need to value culture.