

Next Wave,

NEXT WAVE

Next Wave plays a defining role in the Australian arts landscape as a place where artists test ideas before they are resolved, where disciplines collide, and where new forms of cultural production take shape. For over four decades, we have been a site where artists and arts leaders begin their practice.

We support artists at early and formative stages of their careers, creating the conditions for experimentation through investment in work that reflects social and cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, and inclusion. With a focus on process as much as outcome, we champion work that may not yet fit established institutional frameworks—bridging the space between study and professional practice, and between independent practice and the broader sector.

From our base at Brunswick Mechanics Institute in Naarm/Melbourne, and through a growing network of partners across Victoria and nationally, we deliver a program of learning, commissions, residencies, and public outcomes. Our work is artist-led and interdisciplinary, enabling artists and audiences to test ideas, push boundaries, and engage with new perspectives that shape the future of Australian art.

Next Wave is a place to begin—and to begin again.

Next Wave Submission to the Review of the National Cultural Policy

Next Wave welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of the National Cultural Policy and to reflect on the future of Australia's cultural ecology. As an organisation that has spent more than four decades supporting emerging and early-career artists, we believe this review presents a critical opportunity to address one of the most pressing structural issues facing the sector: the widening gap in support for young people, emerging artists, and the organisations that sustain them.

Australia's cultural future depends not only on the success of major institutions, but on the health of the ecosystems that develop artists, producers, curators, and audiences over time. Emerging practice is not a niche concern. It is the research and development arm of the cultural sector. Without sustained investment in early-career pathways, the long-term vitality, diversity, and resilience of Australian culture is placed at risk.

This issue has become increasingly urgent in the current context. Arts funding has failed to keep pace with CPI and rising operational costs. Arts education is becoming less accessible, with university arts degrees more expensive than ever and arts programs being reduced in schools across the country, including in jurisdictions where arts participation is embedded within cultural policy priorities. At the same time, young people are facing increasing cost of living pressures and barriers to stable employment, training, housing, and mental wellbeing. These pressures are having a profound impact on the capacity of young artists to sustain creative practice and careers.

Against this backdrop, a decline in arts funding at federal and state levels over the past decade, exacerbated by the loss of state government operational funding for Next Wave in 2026, signals a broader erosion of infrastructure dedicated to emerging artists at the precise moment it is needed most. Next wave is one of the only nationally recognised platforms

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dedicated specifically to early-career artists and experimental practice, the effects of this disinvestment will be felt for years to come, not only by artists, but across the broader cultural workforce and audiences of the future.

This submission calls for a renewed national commitment to:

- Emerging artists
- Small-to-medium organisations (S2M); and
- Long-term investment in cultural infrastructure

It also proposes practical opportunities for government to strengthen the sector through cross-portfolio investment, new workforce strategies, audience development models, and more equitable approaches to measuring cultural impact.

The Missing Middle: Emerging Artists Falling Through the Cracks

There is currently a growing disconnect between the aspirations of young artists and the structures available to support them. Emerging artists are increasingly expected to operate within a highly professionalised sector while having fewer transition and access points into it.

The traditional pathways that once enabled artists to build sustainable careers are weakening:

- Independent and experimental S2M organisations are under increasing financial pressure.
- Producer, curator and arts-worker pathways are shrinking.
- Mentorship and peer-learning models are under-resourced.
- Paid opportunities are becoming less frequent.
- Arts education is less affordable and less accessible.
- Young people face broader economic instability that limits their ability to take creative risks.

The consequence is a generation of artists falling through the cracks at precisely the stage where investment has the greatest long-term impact.

This issue extends beyond artists alone. The sector is also experiencing a decline in the development of producers, programmers, curators and cultural workers. These roles are critical to sustaining artistic ecosystems, yet there are increasingly few training grounds and professional development pathways where emerging practitioners can develop skills, take risks, and build professional networks in supported environments.

Small-to-medium organisations like Next Wave have historically played this role. They provide the connective tissue between education and professional practice. They are places where artists test ideas, where disciplines intersect, where audiences encounter new voices, and where future sector leaders are developed.

Without this infrastructure, the sector risks becoming less diverse, less resilient, and less sustainable over time.

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY PILLARS

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First Nations First

First Nations First is a foundational commitment of the National Cultural Policy and must be implemented as a system-wide structural responsibility.

At present, there remains a significant gap between policy intent and the resourcing required to support First Nations artists, cultural leaders, and organisations, particularly emerging and early-career practitioners.

Too often, First Nations cultural leadership is expected to be embedded within existing organisational frameworks without adequate investment in governance, staffing, cultural protocols, and long-term relationship-building. This creates an inequitable distribution of labour, where First Nations practitioners are asked to carry cultural, consultative, and care responsibilities without appropriate financial or institutional support.

A critical gap exists in the support of First Nations young people and emerging artists. While strong work is being undertaken across the sector, there is no coordinated national framework supporting First Nations creative development across the full early-career lifecycle.

Without this infrastructure and additional investment, First Nations emerging artists face uneven access to opportunity, or are required to navigate systems not designed with cultural safety or continuity in mind.

A Place for Every Story

Australia's cultural strength lies in the diversity of its stories, communities and lived experiences. Ensuring that all Australians can see themselves reflected in cultural life requires sustained investment in artists from diverse backgrounds, particularly those facing systemic barriers to participation.

Emerging artists are often at the forefront of cultural innovation and social change. They are developing new forms, new narratives, and new ways of engaging audiences. Yet they are also the most vulnerable to economic pressures and funding instability.

Investment in emerging practice is therefore not only an artistic issue, but a democratic and social one. It determines whose stories are able to be told, who has access to cultural participation, and whose perspectives shape Australia's cultural future.

The same applies to artists and audiences who identify with a disability. Accessibility and inclusion cannot be treated as optional add-ons or project-specific costs. They require ongoing investment, staffing, expertise, infrastructure, training and care frameworks.

Funding structures must support the real operational costs of this work.

The Centrality of the Artist

The National Cultural Policy rightly recognises the centrality of the artist. This principle must be reflected not only rhetorically, but structurally.

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Supporting artists requires investment in the full ecology around them:

- affordable and accessible development opportunities;
- paid pathways into professional practice;
- mentorship and peer-learning structures;
- producing and curatorial support;
- rehearsal, presentation, studio and gathering spaces;
- organisations able to broker relationships between artists, audiences and institutions.

Importantly, artists and arts workers cannot be understood as separate constituencies. Many artists also work within cultural organisations, often in underpaid or precarious conditions. The health of arts organisations is directly connected to the wellbeing and sustainability of artists themselves.

When organisations are forced into survival mode due to stagnant funding and rising costs, resources are redirected away from artists and audiences toward organisational maintenance and governance compliance. This has cumulative consequences: reduced artistic risk-taking, staff burnout, workforce attrition, and fewer opportunities for emerging practitioners.

To genuinely place artists at the centre of cultural policy, government investment must support the organisations and systems that allow artists to thrive across the full lifecycle of their careers.

Strong Institutions Need Strong Ecosystems

Australia's major cultural institutions cannot exist without a healthy pipeline of emerging artists, audiences, and arts workers. Yet the organisations most responsible for developing this pipeline are often the least securely resourced.

Small-to-medium organisations deliver disproportionate cultural value relative to their size. They:

- grow new artistic practice;
- support experimentation and innovation;
- engage communities in deep and sustained ways;
- create entry points for underrepresented voices;
- nurture future cultural leaders;
- generate artistic and workforce pipelines for the broader sector.

However, current funding models often privilege scale, visibility and audience volume over depth of engagement, creative development and long-term impact.

This creates structural inequity within the sector. Smaller organisations are asked to deliver ambitious outcomes with limited operational support, while simultaneously competing against larger institutions with significantly greater resources and capacity.

A more sustainable policy approach would recognise cultural infrastructure as an ecosystem rather than a hierarchy. This means investing not only in flagship institutions, but in the organisations that cultivate future practice and future audiences.

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Government should consider:

- multi-year operational funding models indexed to CPI;
- supporting organisations that invest in emerging artist and producer pathways;
- dedicated resources for organisational adaptation and structural reform;
- support for regional and local government, community and education partnerships;
- funding frameworks that recognise qualitative impact and community depth alongside audience numbers.

Reaching Audiences Differently

Current approaches to measuring audience impact often privilege scale over depth. Small organisations are frequently evaluated against metrics that favour large institutions, despite operating with fundamentally different models of engagement.

Community-based and artist-led organisations often foster highly meaningful and sustained relationships with audiences, participants and local communities. Their impact cannot always be measured through attendance numbers alone.

Government has an opportunity to lead a more nuanced national conversation around audience development and cultural value by:

- recognising qualitative engagement alongside quantitative reach;
- supporting audience development initiatives across artforms;
- valuing experimentation and community connection;
- investing in long-term cultural participation strategies for young people.

Audience development should not only focus on attracting larger audiences to established institutions. It should also support audiences to encounter new work, engage with emerging artists, and participate in contemporary culture in meaningful ways.

Practical Policy Actions for a Sustainable Cultural Future – Recommendations

1. National Youth Cultural Access Scheme

A federally supported program providing free or heavily subsidised tickets for people under 25 to attend live performance, exhibitions, and festivals across funded organisations.

This would:

- build long-term audience participation habits;
- reduce cost barriers at a time of rising living and education costs;
- strengthen early cultural literacy and engagement;
- support organisations through guaranteed ticket subsidies rather than ad hoc discounting.
- This could be modelled on existing concession frameworks but extended nationally with a digital access pass.

2. Paid Industry Learning and “Cultural Apprenticeships”

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Establish a funded national program that supports emerging artists, producers, curators, and arts workers through structured paid placements inside small-to-medium cultural organisations.

This would:

- formalise the currently unpaid or informal “entry pathways” into the sector;
- rebuild the producer/curator pipeline;
- support organisational capacity while training future workforce;
- recognise cultural work as skilled labour requiring structured learning environments.
- This could sit across Creative Australia, state agencies, and vocational education providers.

3. Emerging Artist Development Guarantee (Organisational Infrastructure)

A dedicated funding stream for organisations whose primary purpose is the development of early-career artists, recognising them as key cultural infrastructure, not project-based recipients.

This would:

- stabilise organisations like Next Wave that operate as sector R&D;
- ensure continuity of mentoring, commissioning, and development programs;
- enable long-term artist pathways rather than project-by-project survival;
- protect against the erosion of “in-between” career stages;
- strengthen S2M organisational capacity and sustainability

4. Cross-Portfolio Cultural Pathways (Arts + Education + Health)

The arts should not be understood solely as a cultural portfolio issue. Increasingly, artists and arts organisations are contributing to outcomes across education, health, youth wellbeing, social cohesion, and community resilience.

There is significant opportunity for government to strengthen cross-portfolio investment in the arts, particularly in relation to:

- youth engagement and employment;
- mental health and wellbeing;
- arts education;
- community connection and social participation;
- regional development;
- disability inclusion;
- intercultural understanding.

This could support:

- artist residencies embedded in schools (including public schools experiencing arts program reduction);
- arts-led wellbeing programs in youth mental health services;

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- partnerships between cultural organisations and TAFEs/universities for industry-led curriculum;
- regional outreach programs delivered through local government with federal co-investment.

Emerging artists are already working across these intersections in innovative ways. Strategic investment could unlock substantial social and economic value while strengthening long-term cultural participation.

5. National Framework for Emerging Artist Workforce Development

A coordinated national strategy addressing the decline in arts workers (producers, curators, technicians, programmers), including:

- funded traineeships in cultural organisations;
- national mentorship networks;
- supported “return to practice” pathways for mid-career artists;
- leadership development programs embedded in small-to-medium organisations;
- leadership development programs for First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse practitioners embedded in small-to-medium organisations.

This directly addresses the pipeline failure currently being experienced across the sector.

6. Audience Development Beyond Attendance Metrics

A revised national reporting framework that values:

- repeat engagement, creative development and depth of participation;
- community co-design and local cultural development;
- youth engagement outcomes over raw attendance figures;
- qualitative cultural impact indicators.

This would allow smaller organisations to be assessed on the value of engagement, not just scale.

Conclusion

The review of the National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to build a more sustainable, equitable and future-focused cultural sector.

Australia cannot afford to lose the organisations, artists and pathways that cultivate the next generation of cultural life. The consequences of disinvestment in emerging practice are not just immediate but they are cumulative and long-term. The effects will be felt in diminished artistic diversity, weakened workforce pipelines, reduced cultural participation, and the loss of future sector leaders and creative practitioners.

These challenges are not without solutions. A coordinated national response could include a Youth Cultural Access Scheme, structured paid industry learning pathways, and dedicated investment in emerging artist development organisations as key cultural infrastructure. Together with cross-portfolio investment linking arts, education and health, and a more

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nuanced approach to measuring cultural participation, these measures would rebuild the pipeline between education and professional practice. They would ensure that Australia does not lose a generation of artists, but instead builds the conditions for them to thrive.

Next Wave urges government to recognise young people, emerging artists, and the small-to-medium arts organisations that support them at the centre of a renewed national cultural policy.

Investment in emerging practice is an investment in Australia's cultural future.