



Belong, Trust, Connect

**Policy opportunities for social cohesion through
arts and culture**

March 2025



A New Approach (ANA)

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About ANA

A New Approach (ANA) is Australia's national arts and culture think tank. We believe Australia can become a cultural powerhouse whose creativity is locally loved, nationally valued and globally influential.

Through credible and independent public leadership, ANA helps build an ambitious and innovative policy and investment environment for arts, culture and creativity. We work to ensure that Australia can be a great place for creators and audiences, whoever they are and wherever they live.

ANA acknowledges the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and their continuing cultural and creative practices in this land.

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About this Analysis Paper

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Cohesion under pressure

The social fabric that binds Australia is being tested. Stabilising and rebuilding social cohesion could not be more relevant or important at this time.

ANA's analysis has identified that governments across Australia are not optimising avenues to leverage cultural and creative engagement to repair and sustain cohesion – despite recognising cohesion is a priority.¹ There is untapped potential in cultural and creative engagement across leisure, recreation, work and study to reconnect communities and rebuild belonging and trust, including within the cultural sector itself, more now than in recent memory.

Indeed, the sector is challenging itself as much, if not more, than the broader community as it grapples with geopolitical issues in a domestic context.

This Analysis Paper is ANA's resource for people and organisations looking for policy initiatives that can bring and keep us together through arts and culture. It combines ANA's previous research insights on cohesion, arts and culture² with an analysis of real-world policies that are leveraging cultural and creative engagement to connect communities and foster belonging and trust.

Cohesion matters because it empowers people in Australia to pursue our ambitions and aspirations together, and to achieve prosperity and wellbeing.³ The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (the Scanlon Institute) describes cohesion as 'the willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper'.⁴ In other words, being well and well-off relies on our willingness to work with one another.

International comparisons show that Australia's cohesion has historically been strong compared to its peers and, on this international comparative basis, cohesion remains a strong foundation of Australian society.⁵ However, in 2024, social cohesion stayed weaker after the worst results on record in 2023.⁶ The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion shows that cohesion in Australia declined from 100 points in 2007 to an estimated 85 points in 2024.⁷ The cost of living, debates about migration and concerns about international conflicts are testing the common bonds between us.⁸

Without cohesion, Australian society and the economy would suffer. We would lack the sense of belonging and connected communities that enable all of us to participate in society. Likewise, we would lack trust in those around us and in our institutions, which form the foundations of community, business and democracy.

The Scanlon Institute emphasises that social cohesion is 'how the community operates together in a diverse society' rather than 'a sense of homogeneity, a form of strict unity'.⁹ This focus on a diverse society is reflected in successive federal governments' national positions on social cohesion.¹⁰ In contemporary Australia, this includes a broad range of political, religious and other beliefs, as well as factors such as gender, location, race, ethnicity, migration, sexual orientation, disability, language, education and age.

Social cohesion is complex, and arts and culture's contribution is only one part of the puzzle. Nor is the sole purpose of arts and culture to foster social cohesion – at times, it will challenge and question cohesion. Nonetheless, creative and cultural engagement has a contribution to make.

Fortunately, research shows that people in Australia already believe arts and culture helps them connect with their families and communities,¹¹ and data shows we are a highly culturally active nation.¹² From suburban dance schools and library storytime sessions to catching a film at the cinema and attending once-in-a-lifetime concerts, these experiences are woven into our everyday lives.

A recent analysis of national household data reveals that, for people in Australia, attending 'events that bring people together, such as fetes, shows, festivals or other community events', is the single highest contributor to community participation – other than spending time with family and friends – and attending events is the strongest contributor to civic engagement.¹³

This Analysis Paper identifies gaps in current policies and outlines policy steps that governments should take so that cultural and creative engagement can play its part in rebuilding cohesion in Australia.

Untapped potential to rebuild cohesion

Australia has real potential to pursue cohesion through policies that foster cultural and creative engagement. However, only a fraction of the policies that could help rebuild cohesion leverages the potential of arts and culture.

Credible research, existing policies and current practices all confirm this potential. In this paper, the section [What the research shows](#) outlines key research showing how arts and culture strengthens cohesion through belonging, trust and community connection. The section [Policies in action](#) highlights policies that have supported cultural and creative engagement to bolster cohesion, along with practical case studies backed by evaluation.

From a review of existing research, policy and practice, ANA has identified three key findings:

1. Cultural policies do not consistently pursue cohesion.
2. Only some policies pursuing cohesion leverage arts and culture.
3. There's more scope for arts and culture to support cohesion among young people.

All cultural policies have the potential to better target cohesion and measure success. None of the cultural policies reviewed at a federal, state or territory level address cohesion through the full policy cycle - from planning and implementation to evaluation.

Finding 1: Cultural policies do not consistently pursue cohesion

Only some governments explicitly pursue cohesion through cultural policy, particularly the most recent policies of the Queensland, Victorian and federal governments. These cultural policies include both cohesion as a policy objective **and** specific actions aimed at explicitly fostering cohesion. Other state and territory cultural policies only pursue cohesion **implicitly** - either by including it as a policy objective **or** by incorporating actions that may contribute to cohesion but without explicitly intending to achieve it. For details, see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Which federal, state and territory cultural policies pursue cohesion?

Jurisdiction	Does the policy pursue cohesion?	Release year
WA	Yes, implicitly	2024
NT	Yes, implicitly	2024
NSW	Yes, implicitly	2023
Federal	Yes, explicitly	2023
ACT	Yes, implicitly	2022
QLD	Yes, explicitly	2022
VIC	Yes, explicitly	2021
TAS	No	2020
SA	Yes, implicitly	2019

Finding 2: Only some policies pursuing cohesion leverage arts and culture

Many policies designed to deliver cohesion fail to tap into arts and culture. Missed opportunities span various policy areas – from tackling extremism and safeguarding a secure society to building inclusive communities. Some policies mention both cohesion as well as arts and culture but do not clearly link them. Others make little mention of arts and culture, while some support cultural and creative activities without clarifying that cultural and creative projects fall within their scope. See [Policies supporting arts and culture to deliver cohesion](#) for details.

Nonetheless, there are ample opportunities to leverage arts and culture. Our analysis includes Australian and overseas case studies where policymakers specifically applied arts and culture to achieve cohesion, including major policies that continue to build cohesion. See [Practical case studies of specific projects](#) for details.

Some policies that deliver or measure cohesion already leverage arts and culture. These policies span a wide range of areas – from multiculturalism, regional development and wellbeing to urban planning and major events. They link arts and culture explicitly to cohesion, either as a means of achieving cohesion or as an indicator of it. This confirms that governments in Australia already recognise the potential to apply arts and culture to rebuilding cohesion. For details, see [Appendix 2: Cohesion policy examples](#).

Finding 3: There's more scope for arts and culture to support cohesion among young people

Research shows that younger adults have a low sense of cohesion. According to the Scanlon Institute, they experience a weaker sense of belonging and lower trust in others than the wider adult population. The Scanlon Institute also states that 'younger and disadvantaged Australians have the least favourable perception of Australia's social fabric'.¹⁴

Fortunately, arts and culture holds great potential to rebuild cohesion for young Australians. There is an opportunity to leverage their strong engagement with arts and culture to foster cohesion. Both research and policy in action confirm how cultural and creative engagement helps to build belonging and trust among young people in Australia. Ample examples of policy interventions demonstrate how cultural and creative engagement improves cohesion for young people.

For details, see [What the research shows](#) below.

Opportunities to live well together

Noting Finding 1 that ‘cultural policies do not consistently pursue cohesion’:

Opportunity 1.A

Government agencies developing cultural policy should make cohesion an explicit objective and ensure that actions and evaluations are targeted at cohesion to secure an ongoing contribution from arts and culture.¹⁵

Upcoming opportunities include:

- The next national cultural policy.
- The Victorian cultural policy scheduled for release in 2025.
- New South Wales' first triennial Creative Statement to Parliament.
- The Northern Territory's first action plan under its current cultural policy.
- Action plans and specific policies under existing and future cultural policies.

Opportunity 1.B

Government agencies supporting cultural and creative engagement should prioritise investment in initiatives that connect communities and foster belonging and trust.

For example, these agencies should:

- Prioritise engagement and inclusion-boosting policy options for grants, partnerships and voucher schemes, such as those that:
 - locate activities in or near people's communities
 - tap into high trust in cultural institutions to build recurring engagement
 - focus on young people who have particularly low belonging and trust in others.
- Learn from and invest in organisations that lead in community-engaged practice and in efforts to diversify arts and culture audiences.¹⁶

Opportunity 1.C

The National Cabinet should establish a Ministerial Council of Cultural Ministers, reporting annually to the National Cabinet, with a seat for a representative of Australian local governments.

Its initial terms of reference should include:

- The Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympics cultural programme from 2028 and how it will deliver long-term benefits for Australians, such as cohesion.
- The cohesion benefits of cultural and creative activity, including activities supported by existing grants, partnerships and voucher schemes.

Noting Finding 2 that ‘only some policies pursuing cohesion leverage arts and culture’:

Opportunity 2.A

The House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs should conduct an inquiry into social cohesion in Australia.

The terms of reference should include:

- The potential contribution of social activities, including cultural and creative activities, to rebuilding cohesion.
- The potential for cultural and creative activities to rebuild young people’s sense of belonging and trust in others.

Opportunity 2.B

The Department of Home Affairs, working closely with the Office for the Arts and relevant cultural agencies, should update the guidelines for the Strong and Resilient Communities Activity – Inclusive Communities grant program ahead of Round 5 to explicitly include the breadth of cultural and creative activities contributing to cohesion.

The Department of Home Affairs should also update the guidelines of other relevant grant programs.

Opportunity 2.C

Governments should bolster cohesion through the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic four-year cultural programme starting in 2028.

Specifically:

- Governments at all levels should plan now to deliver the Brisbane 2032 cultural programme from 2028, including through volunteering, with an explicit aim of fostering cohesion.
- The Games Delivery Partners should include ‘social cohesion through the cultural programme’ on the 2025 agenda for discussion.
- The Games Delivery Partners and the Games Independent Infrastructure and Coordination Authority should pursue cohesion through arts, culture and creativity, as set out in the Brisbane 2032 Legacy Strategy.¹⁷

Opportunity 2.D

Governments should include cohesion as a key outcome in wellbeing frameworks and use cultural and creative engagement as an indicator of cohesion.

This applies to all jurisdictions’ wellbeing frameworks, including:

- The NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework (to be presented in the 2025–26 NSW Budget) and any subsequent reviews or reporting.
- The federal *Measuring What Matters* framework, including any ongoing reporting by The Treasury (such as its dashboard) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (including the expanded General Social Survey from 2026).

Opportunity 2.E

Democratic institutions should urgently partner with cultural institutions – including galleries, libraries and museums – to reverse declining trust in institutions through cultural and creative activities.¹⁸

The Department of Finance, Department of Home Affairs and Office for the Arts should collaborate with cultural institutions and peak bodies (such as AMaGA and ALIA) to extend efforts to build trust in democratic institutions and civic participation, particularly in regional and remote communities.¹⁹

Opportunity 2.F

The Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs should lead a 2025 APS200 discussion on the next steps to strengthen democracy, including through cultural institutions.

The Special Envoy for Social Cohesion should be invited to this discussion.

Opportunity 2.G

The National Cabinet should task the First Secretaries Group with a project on rebuilding social cohesion. The group should report back by the end of 2025 on priority opportunities, including leveraging public investment and partnerships in cultural and creative activities.

Noting Finding 3 that ‘there’s more scope for arts and culture to support cohesion among young people’:

Opportunity 3.A

Agencies pursuing cohesion among young people should fund further cultural and creative engagement to strengthen cohesion in young people.

This leverages high cultural and creative engagement among young people (and parents of children under 16)²⁰ to bolster community connection and belonging for under-16s affected by the federal social media ban, which is likely to come into effect in 2026.

Specifically:

- Federal, state and territory voucher schemes for sporting and recreational activities should be expanded to include a wider range of cultural and creative activity providers. Cohesion, including belonging and trust in others, should be an explicit target outcome of such voucher schemes.
- Agencies responsible for social cohesion, youth affairs and the arts should provide funding to ensure these voucher schemes are accessible to young people, including those under 16.

Opportunity 3.B

At the third roundtable of the 2023–33 Investment Dialogue on Australia’s Children, philanthropic organisations, governments and for-purpose organisations should discuss public–philanthropic opportunities in cultural and creative projects to strengthen cohesion for disadvantaged young Australians.²¹

This includes considering philanthropic investment in policies that fund cultural and creative activities for community connection, such as those listed in [Policies supporting arts and culture to deliver cohesion](#).

Opportunity 3.C

The Department of Social Services should seek information about the impacts of cultural and creative engagement on community connection as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the First Action Plan 2023–26 under the Safe and Supported framework for protecting Australia’s children.

What the research shows

Australia faces real and immediate social cohesion challenges.²² International and domestic research has established that cohesion is essential for healthy people, societies and economies and that creative and cultural engagement has proven to be beneficial for cohesion.

Cultural and creative activities help build community, belonging and trust while enhancing empathy and inclusion.²³ These activities also help combat loneliness and isolation, support individuals and communities in recovering from disasters and trauma, and make cities, suburbs and regions more liveable.²⁴

ANA has identified that arts, culture and creativity contribute to cohesion in two distinct ways:

1. Connecting communities.
2. Fostering belonging and trust.²⁵

These cohesion-focused insights from ANA's *Transformative Edge 2024* are summarised below.

Connecting communities

The evidence on connecting communities

Cultural and creative engagement counteracts cohesion challenges such as loneliness, isolation and disrupted connections. According to ANA research, this engagement provides opportunities to connect with others and socialise.²⁶

ANA research also shows that 'arts and culture are particularly effective in creating social networks among different sorts of people who would not otherwise have come together, therefore providing cohesion across otherwise divergent demographic groups'.²⁷ According to the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey of the Australian population:

- Nearly half (46%) of respondents said a key motivation for attending arts events is 'to socialise and connect'.²⁸
- More than a third (36%) said a key motivation is 'to understand other perspectives and cultures'.²⁹
- The vast majority (91%) of specifically engaged culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) respondents feel cultural and creative experiences allow them to connect with others, compared to 69% of CALD respondents overall and 56% of Australians.³⁰
- Younger people, aged 15–34, are much more likely than those aged 55 and over to connect with and share their cultural background through arts and creativity (47% compared to 18%).³¹

A 2021 Australian survey found that Australians agree that engaging in art, cultural and creative activities has a positive impact on families' quality of life (70% of respondents) and the community's quality of life (72%).³² In addition, a Victorian Government-commissioned review found strong evidence supporting the use of cultural and creative activities to improve social connection, inclusion and engagement.³³

ANA research found that middle Australians believe arts and culture helps bring communities together, breaks down barriers between different groups within society and encourages greater communication and cohesion.³⁴ In particular, Baby Boomer middle Australians believe that cultural participation encourages 'pro-social' behaviours and skills by helping individuals test opinions, negotiate, listen, compromise, see others' points of view and engage in healthy disagreements.³⁵

For case studies of policy connecting communities through arts and culture, see [Practical case studies of specific projects](#).

Fostering belonging and trust

The evidence on belonging

Australians' sense of belonging deteriorated from 2007 to 2024.³⁶ In particular, 18- to 34-year-olds reported a much lower sense of belonging than other cohorts.³⁷ Belonging is defined by the Scanlon Institute as 'being a part of something: social groups, physical places, or collective experiences'.³⁸

ANA's research demonstrates that arts, culture and creativity can build cohesion by promoting a sense of belonging to a place, group or cultural activity.³⁹ Cultural and creative experiences create belonging across ages, places and people. Additionally, middle Australians believe that cultural and creative engagement helps build a sense of belonging and connection at individual, community and national identity levels.⁴⁰

However, experiences of disinterest, disengagement or exclusion may limit this cohesion benefit.⁴¹ Research shows 3 in 10 Australians agree that cultural and creative experiences are 'not really for people like them'.⁴²

The evidence on trust in people

Australians generally have high levels of trust in one another. In a worldwide survey conducted from 2017 to 2022,⁴³ Australia ranked 11th out of 92 countries. As the Scanlon Institute confirms, 'Trust that people have in each other is one of the foundations of cohesion'.⁴⁴ However, younger Australians have lower levels of trust in others compared to older cohorts, according to research by the Scanlon Institute.⁴⁵ Given that children and young people have higher-than-average cultural attendance and participation,⁴⁶ arts and culture engagement presents an opportunity to help younger Australians build belonging and trust.

ABS data shows that attendance at cultural venues and events is higher for Australians under 35 (83%–95%) than for the general population (80%).⁴⁷

The evidence on trust in institutions

'Trust in government and other institutions is an important foundation for democracy and the smooth and cohesive functioning of society', according to the Scanlon Institute.⁴⁸

Australians place greater trust in museums and other cultural institutions than in their governments. According to a 2021 national survey of Australians:⁴⁹

- 80% trust libraries, 78% trust museums and 67% trust art galleries.
- Fewer trust the public service (55%) and governments at the local (49%), state/territory (55%) and federal (42%) levels.

Overseas studies reinforce these Australian survey results. Population surveys from Germany and the United States also confirm that museums are highly trusted – second only to family and friends.⁵⁰ Similarly, a 2023 OECD survey found that Australians' trust in their three levels of government remained as low as in 2021.⁵¹

The head of ASIO noted in 2024 that 'trust in institutions is eroding' when raising Australia's National Terrorism Threat Level to Probable.⁵² According to ASIO's assessment, politically motivated violence – including 'attacks on ... democratic institutions' – is a key security concern.⁵³

For case studies of policies fostering belonging and trust through arts and culture, see [Practical case studies of specific projects](#).

Policies in action

Some governments already use cultural and creative engagement to bolster cohesion, often with proven results. This section demonstrates how the known impacts of arts and culture on cohesion are already being utilised in real-world policies. In many instances, evaluations confirm how specific policies have used arts and culture to improve cohesion.

This section outlines:

- Policies funding and otherwise supporting cultural and creative activities.
- Practical case studies of specific cultural and creative projects supported by policies.

Policies supporting arts and culture to deliver cohesion

Connecting communities

Recognising that arts and culture can connect communities, bipartisan approaches have been taken across all levels of government to fund cultural and creative activities such as festivals, live performances and multicultural events. This funding not only enables Australians to celebrate their diverse, contemporary communities but also strengthens cohesion within them.

Table 2: Policies funding cultural and creative activities for community connection

Initiative	Objectives (and evaluation results)	Funding
Strong and Resilient Community Activity - Inclusive Communities (federal) ⁵⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support vulnerable and disadvantaged people on pathways to social and economic empowerment through local community-driven solutions. • A commissioned evaluation found improved community participation and networks for participants, including First Nations participants.⁵⁵ 	\$63 million for 2022–28 (since 2018)
Multicultural Grants Program – Multicultural Grassroots Initiatives (federal) ⁵⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build the capacity of community-led organisations to foster a cohesive multicultural Australia. • For culturally and linguistically diverse people: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foster integration through higher social participation • build a sense of community and belonging. 	\$4.8 million for 2024–26
National Multicultural Festival Grants (ACT) ⁵⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate community participation in the festival to showcase cultural traditions and heritage and support multicultural traditions and celebrations.⁵⁸ • A 2023 survey of attendees found that the festival 'enriches and strengthens Canberra as a diverse and multicultural community' (93%) and 'raises the profile of multicultural communities' (95%).⁵⁹ 	\$220,000 in 2025 (since 1998)
Harmony Week grants (WA) ⁶⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support community-led activities promoting and celebrating multiculturalism. 	\$42,000 in 2024 (since 2003)
Street Banner Sponsorships (Sydney) ⁶¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen cultural and community life. • Increase awareness of registered charities, not-for-profits and cultural institutions and their activities. 	Access to street poles since 2007
Social Cohesion Small Grant Program (Tas) ⁶²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address racism and foster social cohesion. • Respond to and address anti-social behaviour. • Improve perceived and real safety for culturally and linguistically diverse Tasmanians. 	\$200,000 in 2024

Fostering belonging and trust

Recognising that arts and culture can also foster belonging and trust in people, successive governments at all levels have invested in creative and cultural experiences. Investments in multilingual experiences, for instance, allow all Australians to access cultural content from around the world in their chosen language, building a sense of belonging and trust.

This approach supports cohesion for First Nations peoples and their many languages. Likewise, it strengthens cohesion for Australians who hail from every nation on earth and speak a variety of languages at home in the world's first migrant-majority, English-speaking nation.⁶³

Table 3: Policies supporting multilingual cultural and creative experiences to foster belonging and trust

Initiative	Objectives and activities
Non-English content on ABC ⁶⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Inclusive content, products and services' is a policy aim of the ABC.⁶⁵ ABC Education offers stories for children in a range of First Nations languages and Australian Sign Language (Auslan).
Harristown Multilingual Project (Toowoomba, Qld) ⁶⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aimed to 'develop students' confidence in allowing them to become part of their school and the broader local community'. Involved dance and drama workshops for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.
Non-English subtitles on SBS ⁶⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to 'enable social, civic and economic ... participation for people who speak a language other than English'.⁶⁸ SBS On Demand has collections in simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Korean.
Library bilingual storytime (Willoughby NSW) ⁶⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A policy aim of the Willoughby City Library is 'a city that is connected and inclusive', noting that 41% of its population speaks a language other than English at home.⁷⁰ It runs weekly sessions in English and Mandarin, Korean or Japanese.
Non-English tours by the Museum of Brisbane ⁷¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Access' is one of four stated values, and 'reflect our people and passions' is a goal of the Museum of Brisbane.⁷² Museum and City Hall tours operate in Auslan, Spanish, Mandarin, Filipino, Bengali and Japanese. The museum also operates storytime sessions in Spanish, Mandarin, Auslan, Portuguese and Hindi.

Practical case studies of specific projects

This section presents case studies of policies leveraging specific arts and culture projects (or sets of projects) to strengthen cohesion. These case studies span a range of portfolios – including arts and culture, social services, defence, education and home affairs – as well as countries, including Australia, the UK and the US.

Looking across these case studies suggests several ways to improve the impact of policies designed to rebuild cohesion:

- Locate cultural and creative activities in or near people's communities. Many examples achieved cohesion through community-based activities.
- Invest in time for individuals to immerse and reflect. Many examples involved attendees and participants engaging in culture and creativity over weeks or months.
- Invest in delivery partners that are trusted by and have the expertise to work with specific communities. Many examples leveraged community-specific expertise and the 'embeddedness' of delivery partners for impact.
- Consider cultural and creative activities when other activities do not deliver cohesion. Examples show how arts and culture helped rebuild cohesion, even in the face of adversity.

Connecting communities

Theatre to build community and social interaction

Governments have pursued cohesion policy objectives by investing in Milk Crate Theatre projects.⁷³ The Department of Social Services' NDIS Social and Community Participation Stream program had the policy objective 'to build the capacity of the community for people with disability to participate in and contribute to community life across Australia'.⁷⁴ It funded Milk Crate Theatre creative workshops for people with disabilities to build confidence, foster connections and break down barriers. Impact reporting found measurable confidence improvements (73%-100% of participants across different workshops), happiness during the workshops (90%-100%) and increased creativity (71%).⁷⁵

The NSW Reconstruction Authority's COVID-19 Community Connection and Wellbeing Program aimed to 'promote social resilience and improve community connectedness, supporting communities recovering from COVID-19'.⁷⁶ It funded Milk Crate Theatre workshops spanning comedy and new works. Impact reporting confirmed that one workshop instilled a 'sense of hope about the future' (94% of participants), while another improved participants' sense of community (100%) and ability to interact with others (83%).⁷⁷

Libraries to improve connection between disadvantaged people

The Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone fund aimed to assist disadvantaged people and places through innovative library projects. Through the fund, the UK Arts Council supported 30 projects in 46 library services across England.⁷⁸ A commissioned evaluation found:⁷⁹

- 67% of Middlesbrough participants felt more connected to their local community.
- 75% of Hampshire participants had better contact with friends and family, with a further 17% connecting with new people.
- In Lincolnshire, projects led to the establishment of a multicultural group of women and a group of homeschooled children looking to set up a weekly meeting.

The Australian Library and Information Association has highlighted how Australian libraries also leverage their collections, spaces and staff to inform citizens and support community connection.⁸⁰

Museum investments to build connections with Jewish and Muslim communities

In recent years, the Australian government has invested in cohesion for Jewish and Muslim communities in Australia. Investments in museums have aimed to:

- Educate more Australians about atrocities, courage and resilience by funding the Sydney Jewish Museum to double its annual attendance from the current 55,000 (including 35,000 high school students) by 2032. The NSW Government has made a similar investment.⁸¹
- 'Contribute to social cohesion and foster continued cultural exchange' by funding the Islamic Museum of Australia to 'conduct interfaith youth-focused programs targeting leadership, education and belonging'.⁸²

Although there are no evaluations of these policies at this time, they serve as examples of how arts and culture can incorporate and apply diversity – a policy approach put forward by the Scanlon Institute.⁸³

Fostering belonging and trust

Theatre to rebuild young people's belonging

The Department of Social Services' Diversity and Social Cohesion program aimed to 'build cohesive Australian communities ... by supporting projects that build the long-term capacities of higher-need and at-risk communities'.⁸⁴ This program funded Queensland Theatre to establish Traction, a youth outreach theatre ensemble set up in Logan (south of Greater Brisbane) to respond to 'outbreaks of interracial violence in Logan'.⁸⁵

A commissioned evaluation of Traction found that participating young people:⁸⁶

- 'Felt a sense of belonging no matter their age, gender, background'.
- Were positioned for 'success as artists and adults in the broader community'.

Art therapy to help military service members and veterans communicate with others

Creative Forces is a long-term art therapy program aimed at improving the health, wellbeing and quality of life of military service members exposed to trauma.⁸⁷ It is a joint policy intervention by the United States Defence and Veterans Affairs departments in collaboration with state and local arts agencies. To date, Creative Forces has provided over 140,000 art therapy sessions to 25,000 military service patients.⁸⁸

A peer-reviewed study surveyed 222 service members and found that Creative Forces helped them express and address symptoms that other methods often could not, ultimately enabling them to communicate more effectively with others.⁸⁹

Cultural institution visits to build student understanding and trust in government institutions

Since 1989, the Department of Education's Parliamentary and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) Program has pursued the policy objective of preparing students to be 'active and informed citizens'.⁹⁰ PACER also has an implicit policy objective of building trust in institutions. This is reflected in the national curriculum and assessment authority, which measures 'trust in civic institutions and processes' as an outcome of civics and citizenship learning.⁹¹

PACER leverages the high trust in cultural institutions to build an understanding of Australia's federal system and government institutions.⁹² Each year, it helps 85,000 students and teachers access civics and citizenship education by subsidising visits to cultural institutions (such as the Museum of Australian Democracy) and government institutions (such as Parliament House) in the national capital (colloquially known as the 'Canberra trip').⁹³ PACER is a tiered rebate based on distance from Canberra, with Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania being the five highest rebate zones. Regional and remote students receive additional loadings.

A 2011 evaluation of PACER found that it helps students 'become active and informed citizens', including through cultural institutions.⁹⁴ PACER was in operation when trust in the Australian Parliament among Year 10 students rose from 51% in 2010 to 55% in 2019. Given its unique scale and bipartisan support, it may have contributed to this increase.⁹⁵ Likewise, the OECD found that a greater proportion of Australians (46%) trusted their national government in 2023 than the OECD average (39%).⁹⁶

Appendix 1 – Cultural policies mentioning cohesion

For this Analysis Paper, a cultural policy **explicitly** pursues cohesion if:

- Cohesion is a **key** outcome of the policy (or at least an aspect of cohesion, such as a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, trust or community connection), **and**
- The policy includes a specific action **with the explicit, unequivocal intent** to contribute to cohesion (or an aspect of cohesion).⁹⁷

A cultural policy **implicitly** pursues cohesion if:

- Cohesion (or an aspect of cohesion) is an outcome of the policy **or**
- The policy includes a specific action **without an explicit, unequivocal intent** to contribute to cohesion (or an aspect of cohesion).

The following cultural policies *explicitly* pursue cohesion:

Jurisdiction	Relevant excerpts
Queensland ⁹⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Strengthen wellbeing, social cohesion and creativity in Queensland through cultural and creative engagement' is one of four policy focus areas. • 'Foster partnerships ... that support community creativity and cohesion' is a specific action for 2022-26.
Victoria ⁹⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy notes that 'for individuals and communities facing uncertainty and change ... creative participation can play an important role in bringing people together, fostering cohesion'. • It commits to 'provide more opportunities for creative participation across the state', with several specific actions to achieve this.
Federal ¹⁰⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking a Multicultural Framework Review is an action under one of five pillars ('A Place for Every Story') in the policy. • It seeks to ensure that federal policy settings and institutional frameworks 'support efforts to further strengthen social cohesion and inclusion'.

The following cultural policies *implicitly* pursue cohesion:

Jurisdiction	Relevant excerpts
Australian Capital Territory ¹⁰¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Canberra is enlivened by public art that contributes to its identity and belonging and reflects the diversity of the community' is a success measure. • 'Creative participation plays an important role in ... cohesion' is another.
New South Wales ¹⁰²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy states that 'the power of cultural engagement to enhance belonging and social cohesion is central to the Creative Communities framework'.
Northern Territory ¹⁰³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Territory identity' is one of the five policy principles. Under this principle, the policy states, 'The Territory's vibrant arts and culture ... is reflected in our stories and connects us with a sense of belonging and achievement'.
South Australia ¹⁰⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the three priorities is 'value'. An action under this priority is 'connecting arts and culture with new community partners to enhance the role of the arts and accelerate its impact in areas such as ... social cohesion'.
Western Australia ¹⁰⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social impact, including 'community connection, improved wellbeing and mental health', is one of five outcomes to be measured.

The Tasmanian cultural policy does not mention cohesion (or any aspect of cohesion across the population broadly).¹⁰⁶

Appendix 2 – Cohesion policy examples

The following table includes examples of cohesion-related policy documents that do not fully leverage arts and culture:

Document	Missing or weak link to arts and culture
Victorian Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria, Final Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This mentions 'social cohesion' to counter extremism 48 times but does not link it to arts and culture.¹⁰⁷ The government response is also silent on arts and culture.¹⁰⁸
Securing South Australia 2024–2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This highlights the challenges social cohesion faces from violent extremism, terrorism and misinformation.¹⁰⁹ It expresses a strategic intent to pursue 'engaged, aware and resilient communities' but makes no mention of arts and culture.
Federal Strong and Resilient Communities – Inclusive Communities Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One of four objectives is to 'support young people 12 to 18 years who are disengaged ... from education to reconnect with their community, school, training and/or employment'.¹¹⁰ Under this objective, 'cultural workshops' is the only cultural or creative engagement example for eligible grant projects.¹¹¹

By contrast, the following cohesion-related policy documents leverage arts and culture:

Policy document	How it leverages arts and culture
Measuring What Matters (National Wellbeing Framework)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Creative and cultural engagement' is an indicator of cohesion, one of five wellbeing themes in the framework.¹¹² The ABS reports on this indicator.¹¹³
National Multicultural Framework Review ¹¹⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The updated framework includes 'Identity and Belonging (creating a welcoming Australia)' as one of three principles.¹¹⁵ An action under this principle is to 'invest in community organisations and cultural programs for creative solutions to drive social change through the arts and sport'.¹¹⁶
National Urban Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Liveable and equitable' (including 'promote social cohesion') is a goal.¹¹⁷ To achieve this goal, the policy calls for the provision of 'dedicated spaces for arts, culture, religion, health, recreation and sporting infrastructure'.¹¹⁸
Elevate 2042 (Brisbane 2032 Olympics and Paralympics Legacy Strategy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Fostering arts, culture and creativity' is a focus area.¹¹⁹ Under this focus area, the strategy highlights the role of 'arts and creativity' in 'forming and communicating culture and identity' and how 'performative and creative practices ... nurture feelings of belonging'.¹²⁰
Public Art in Transport Infrastructure (NSW)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aims to 'enhance the transport environment' and 'promote a feeling of belonging and encourage positive behaviour'.¹²¹ Notes that design aspects, including colour and materiality, 'engage wide audiences and help foster inclusion'.¹²² Explicitly calls out roles for architects, urban designers and artists, among others, in public art projects.

For further examples, see [Policies supporting arts and culture to deliver cohesion](#).

Endnotes

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