A New Approach (ANA)

Arts, Culture and Creativity: What middle Australia really thinks

November 2026

Executive Summary

Australia has significant unrealised economic and social potential in one of its most widely shared national capabilities – arts and culture. Middle Australians have a clear message for government: remove the barriers holding this capability back, align investment, use it to help build the economy of the future and strengthen the bonds of trust and belonging that hold communities together.

By working together to unlock this potential through the next National Cultural Policy, governments can help prepare young people for work alongside technology and artificial intelligence (AI), generate jobs and local economic activity, and build stronger, more connected communities.

Middle Australians – swing voters in predominantly marginal electorates aged 35 to 59 – connect arts, culture and creativity with the issues that dominate political life today: preparing children for a future shaped by technology and AI, creating jobs and local economic activity, and strengthening communities under pressure. They do not see arts and culture as separate from these concerns, but as part of the response.

Middle Australians' view is that cost, transport, parking, safety, limited local options and difficulty finding information make access to arts and cultural experiences increasingly unequal. Families facing cost-of-living pressures and people outside major cities encounter the greatest barriers. Public investment cannot deliver its full value if Australians cannot find, reach or afford the opportunities it supports.

Middle Australians want governments at all levels to enable participation, not prescribe what people should value or choose. They favour action that removes barriers; makes better use of existing libraries, galleries, schools, parks and public spaces; and strengthens the systems that allow communities and cultural activity to flourish.

Opportunities for change

At a moment of declining public confidence in government generally,[1] action on arts, culture and creativity offers a way for governments to increase trust by strengthening communities, backing the industries and skills of the future, and speaking directly to the values of everyday Australians.

With nearly four in five Australians attending cultural venues or events annually,[2] and cultural and creative activity contributing $70.3 billion (2.5% of gross domestic product [GDP]) to the Australian economy in 2024–25,[3] now is the time to recognise and develop the full value of arts, culture and creativity.

Middle Australians appreciate the value of arts and culture when it is connected to their children, their work and their communities and see the role of government as strengthening systems that allow communities and cultural activity to flourish. These views highlight five priority opportunity areas where governments should act:

- children and young people
- careers, skills and training
- social cohesion and stronger communities
- removing barriers and enabling participation
- government investment and coordination.

For governments, the choice is whether cultural policy remains a collection of programs at the edge of national priorities or becomes a practical instrument for children's development, workforce capability, regional opportunity and resilient communities. Australia already has strong participation, institutions and creative capability. The task is to remove the barriers that prevent their full value being realised, while aligning systems and stakeholders towards achieving a shared vision.

Change that can begin now

The next National Cultural Policy provides a timely vehicle to ensure arts, culture and creativity are used nationally to develop children's potential, strengthen workforce capability and communities, remove barriers to participation and attract wider investment. This can ultimately turn an activity that Australians already value into a deliberate national advantage.

Within the opportunities identified in this report, four nationally coordinated measures can provide the starting point for change:

- **Explore a national creative education guarantee.** This should include committing to an expectation that every student, regardless of postcode or background, has access to sustained, high-quality creative learning and live cultural experiences during schooling. It should be reinforced by governments agreeing on a small number of creative learning programs that can be scaled into every school in Australia.

- **Make existing state and territory children's activity vouchers activity-agnostic to include arts and culture.** This should see existing state and territory activity voucher schemes (currently focused on sport and limited forms of creative activity) further expanded so children and young people can use them for any form of arts and culture learning and participation.[4]
- **Create training and skills pathways that build a workforce for the future.** This should include every jurisdiction identifying priority creative qualifications for Free TAFE.
- **Test incentives that build new audiences and increase familiarity with cultural venues and events.** Governments should pilot targeted participation measures in communities facing the greatest barriers to determine how best to increase and retain audiences. They should consider incentives that provide match-contributions along with other ways to encourage sustainable private investment in the system.

The opportunity also belongs to the cultural and creative industries and the broader arts, culture and creativity system. A common-good approach will not be credible if advocacy remains divided among institutional interests. Cultural organisations, creators, educators, businesses, philanthropists, local leaders and communities must build a coalition of the willing: many voices advancing the fact that creativity is a national capability whose benefits should be developed and shared more widely.

About Middle Australia

This Insight Report, the fourth in the *Middle Australia* series from A New Approach (ANA), outlines current attitudes towards arts, culture and creativity as observed across 10 online focus groups held in 2026. It sets out what politically unaligned, middle-income Australians aged 35 to 59 in predominantly marginal electorates think, value and expect of governments when it comes to arts, culture and creativity – and where the sharpest policy and political opportunities now sit.

Summary of findings

Finding 1: Creativity is an economic advantage for Australia's future

Middle Australians link creativity with problem-solving, innovation, technology, entrepreneurship and workplace success. Arts, culture and creativity are seen as contributing to the economic landscape, including to cultural tourism and the capabilities needed to thrive in an AI-driven economy. Middle Australians also believe that investing in creativity is investing in Australia's future workforce. The jobs of tomorrow will belong to people who can innovate, adapt and think differently.

Finding 2: Investing in arts and culture is investing in the next generation

Nothing resonates with middle Australians more strongly than the future of children. Arts and cultural education is seen as helping to develop capable adults who are entrepreneurial and able to work effectively alongside technology and AI. Middle Australians believe arts and cultural participation doesn't just create future artists but also helps young people develop essential life skills: confidence, resilience, communication, creativity and empathy.

Finding 3: Arts and culture builds stronger communities

Middle Australians see arts and culture as one of the few things that brings people together across different backgrounds and experiences. At a time when Australians feel they are carrying more pressures than ever, arts and culture helps people connect, lifts spirits, creates joy and strengthens trust and the bonds that make communities resilient.

Finding 4: Australians face real barriers to access

In the current cost-of-living crisis, affordability is a growing barrier. Along with direct costs such as ticket prices, middle Australians face associated expenses and challenges in accessing arts and culture including transport, parking and limited local options. Difficulty finding information exacerbates these barriers. Access challenges are often heightened for families and regional communities.

Finding 5: Australians want governments to enable participation, not tell us what our culture should be

People are most supportive of government action in arts and culture when it removes barriers, reduces costs, improves access and helps local communities create and participate. Middle Australians want governments to clear regulatory hurdles, expand choice and empower local community participation rather than prescribe cultural tastes.

Finding 6: Australians deeply value arts and culture, even when its presence is underestimated

Middle Australians have wide-ranging personal definitions of arts and culture, and value the joy, wellbeing, empathy and social connection it fosters. While people clearly recognise that a world without arts and culture would harm mental health, community cohesion and the economy, they often take for granted how seamlessly arts and culture is already woven into their daily lives.

Summary of opportunities

Opportunity 1: Children and young people

The strongest case begins with children. Middle Australians value arts and cultural education because it builds confidence, resilience, communication, creativity, empathy and imagination. Unequal access makes this an education and opportunity issue. Governments should ensure that family income, transport and postcode do not determine which children can participate.

Opportunity 2: Careers, skills and training

Middle Australians see creativity as an economic capability extending beyond arts and cultural occupations. As AI changes the tasks people perform, the ability to generate ideas, communicate, adapt and solve problems will become more valuable. Governments should build clearer pathways between creative learning, vocational education, industry development and employment.

Opportunity 3: Building social cohesion and stronger communities

Middle Australians associate shared cultural experiences with connection, mutual understanding and belonging across backgrounds, places and generations. This supports treating cultural spaces, activities and local networks as part of the infrastructure that helps communities meet, participate and build trust.

Opportunity 4: Removing barriers and enabling participation

Middle Australians want cultural opportunities to be easier to find, access and afford. Governments should address the combined burden of ticket prices, transport, parking, safety, information and limited local provision. Action should prioritise communities facing the greatest barriers and be tested for whether it attracts new participants.

Opportunity 5: Government investment and coordination

Middle Australians value arts, culture and creativity and want governments to support the systems that sustain them. Governments should treat arts, culture and creativity expenditure as an investment in Australia's social and economic wellbeing, and work together across jurisdictions to coordinate, collaborate and highlight the importance of arts, culture and creativity beyond the cultural portfolio.

Endnotes

1 JWS Research, *True Issues 42: August 202*6, 5. https://www.jwsresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/True_Issues_42_0826-1.pdf

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia—Cultural Attendance and Participation,' accessed 1 September 2026, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release#cultural-attendance-and-participation.

3 Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research, 'Visual Summary: Cultural and Creative Activity in Australia, 2015–16 to 2024–25,' accessed 7 September 2026, table 2, https://www.bitre.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/visual-summary-cultural-and-creative-activity-in-australia-2015-16-to-2024-25-september2026.pdf.

4 A New Approach (ANA), *Opportunity to Action: Enabling Australia's Arts and Culture System*, Policy Action Brief (Canberra: A New Approach, November 2025), https://newapproach.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/A-New-Approach-Policy-Action-Brief_Enabling-Australias-arts-and-culture-system-2025.pdf.