A New Approach (ANA)

Arts, Culture and Creativity: What middle Australia really thinks

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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.

Introduction

Ask most Australians whether they care about arts, culture and creativity, and the answer is 'Yes!' But ask them what that means and the answers become far more interesting. For some, it is a Friday night at the local theatre. For others, it is a child's school musical, a weekend market, exploring First Nations artwork on a council building, visiting the library or hearing Australian voices telling Australian stories on screen.

What's striking is how many Australians engage with arts and culture without necessarily naming it as such. It shows up in daily life so consistently that its value can be easy to overlook, until it is missing. And when it is missing, the gap is felt – as a barrier to a night out, a closed door for a child who might have found their thing, or a community event that never quite got off the ground.

The challenge for policymakers is not whether arts, culture and creativity matter, but how governments can enable more Australians to benefit from them. Middle Australians have expressed a preference: governments should remove barriers such as cost, distance and lack of information rather than prescribe what people should value. In practical terms, this means making participation easier, strengthening the systems that sustain arts, culture and creativity more broadly, and connecting cultural policy to Australia's economic and social priorities.

Middle Australians

This research brings the voices of middle Australians into decisions about Australia's cultural life and the role governments can play in making participation possible.

Middle Australians are defined as:

- politically unaligned or swing voters
- living predominantly in marginal electorates
- from middle-income households
- aged 35 to 59.

The qualitative findings in this report are not a population estimate or electoral mandate, but they do reveal recurring attitudes, language and policy signals that governments and advocates can test with the wider community.

Objectives

The overall objective of this research is to understand and explore current attitudes towards arts, culture and creativity amongst middle Australians, with a specific focus on how they define and value arts and culture and their expectations of governments to enable the arts, culture and creativity system.[5]

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do middle Australians define arts, culture and creativity?
- What role, if any, do arts, culture and creativity play in the lives of middle Australians?
- In what ways do middle Australians think governments should enable the arts, culture and creativity system?
- What are the enablers and barriers of participation in arts, culture and creativity for middle Australians?

Outline

This report comprises two main sections:

- **Findings:** This describes recurring views from the focus groups.
- **Opportunities:** This identifies practical opportunities for governments to test and develop.

Research overview

In total, 62 participants took part in 10 online focus groups. The 90-minute discussions and initial analysis were conducted by specialist qualitative market research firm Visibility, with further thematic analysis undertaken by ANA. The method was designed to explore how people reason and speak about the issues; it does not measure the prevalence of those views across the population.[6]

Box 1 (overleaf) sets out the different contexts in which the *Middle Australia* research has taken place, from 2020 to 2026 – within society and across the arts, culture and creativity system.

Box 1: Now and then – context comparison of Middle Australia in 2020 and 2026

ANA started the *Middle Australia* series in 2020. Since those first focus groups, there have been significant contextual changes both at a general societal level as well as within the arts, culture and creativity system itself.

Broad society-wide issues dominating headlines in 2026 are arguably understood as long-term, structural and grinding. They include:

- the cost of living
- housing affordability
- social cohesion
- generative AI
- complex geopolitical tensions.

In early 2020, the headline issues were more acute, urgent and emerging, with middle Australia focus groups held at the end of a devastating 2019–20 Australian summer bushfire season and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, before anyone had heard of social distancing, PCR tests or border closures.

In the six years since ANA started the *Middle Australia* series, there have also been significant changes influencing and shaping the arts, culture and creativity system:

- The Australian Government published its arts and culture policy *Revive* in January 2023[7] and is currently working on its successor. This will be the first time the federal government will have consecutive arts and culture policies.[8]
- The immediate shock and long tail of the COVID-19 pandemic have altered the arts, culture and creativity system, exposing system fragility, innovation and changing audience behaviours.
- The interest in wellbeing and prosperity across governments has seen key topics enter the forefront of arts and culture policy discussions, including education, workforce and skills, cost of living, trade and international markets, social cohesion, productivity, tax reform and the risks and opportunities posed by generative AI.

Findings

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.

Middle Australians view arts, culture and creativity as essential drivers of Australia's future economic advantage. While focus group participants saw clear links between arts, culture and creativity, they often spoke about creativity in a practical sense – as an everyday skill essential for problem-solving, workplace success and innovation. This practical focus was more evident in 2026 than in earlier iterations of this research.

As routine tasks become increasingly automated by technology and AI, participants indicated they expect the future economy to rely heavily on uniquely human attributes. Consequently, cultivating creativity across industries is seen as a vital strategy for building a resilient, highly adaptable workforce equipped to address both known and unexpected challenges. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> 'Using art, learning art, appreciating art will help people in the future in the workplace and the economy more broadly in solving those future problems, the ones known and unknown.'
>
> **[Male, Brisbane]**

Participants also connected arts and culture to visible local economic activity. They described cultural events as bringing visitors who spend on accommodation, hospitality and retail, particularly in regional communities. They linked a vibrant cultural ecosystem with local employment, community identity and opportunities that keep young people engaged:

> 'People who live in the country, if they come to Perth to see a show, then they're going to spend money … You know, it's good for the economy, because they're spending money dining and, you know, [on] restaurants and accommodation.'
>
> **[Female, Perth]**

> 'Getting the youth off the streets, keeping them active in different areas … it can have a lot of social benefits.'
>
> **[Male, Regional Queensland, Mackay]**

Beyond their direct economic value, arts, cultural and creative activities act as a catalyst for broader productivity gains across the economy, a dynamic previously detailed in ANA's work (see **Box 2** overleaf).

Box 2: Culture and creativity: the productivity gains hiding in plain sight[9]

Productivity growth is the process by which we get more from less: producing more and higher-quality goods and services with fewer hours of work and using fewer resources.

Higher productivity means:

- a better quality of life for Australians, including improved health, housing and education and increased leisure time
- higher incomes for workers
- more government revenue
- a buffer against global shocks
- expanding our options for addressing generational challenges like climate change and population ageing.

ANA's research shows that the cultural and creative industries have an important role to play in turning around Australia's stagnating productivity growth rate by:

- **boosting innovation** both directly and by diffusing it across the Australian economy
- **building an adaptable workforce** through broad-based cultural and creative engagement that builds necessary skills and capabilities to navigate a changing and uncertain working future
- **growing trade and investment**, with the exports of creative goods having increased more than 2.5-fold and creative services having doubled over the past two decades
- **future-proofing employment, workplaces and labour supply** with jobs and skills that are at lower risk of automation
- **contributing to productive employment outcomes** by championing flexible work patterns
- **providing new solutions to generational issues** with creative, evidence-based solutions for growing challenges in healthcare, aged care and climate change.

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.

Focus group participants were quick to highlight the importance of including arts, culture and creativity in education. Rather than viewing these subjects purely as pathways to specialised artistic careers, participants emphasised their broad developmental value in fostering essential life skills.

Through engagement in creative activities, children cultivate core competencies such as problem-solving, empathy, teamwork, communication and adaptability. These traits are seen as fundamental to raising well-rounded, capable adults who can navigate complex challenges and collaborate effectively in their personal and professional lives.

'They've got to be able to pivot. They've got to be able to think outside the box, to go, "Hey, oh, there's something missing there. How can I fill it? What can I do?" And one thing, I think, like, cultural and arts does for students, if it's done the right way, is it gives them the courage to step outside their comfort zone.'

[Female, Regional Queensland, Toowoomba]

Participants also noted that nurturing creative capabilities is essential for preparing students for a rapidly changing job market and a future increasingly shaped by technology and AI. By encouraging curiosity and critical thinking, arts education is viewed as equipping young people to approach problems from new angles and adapt to evolving circumstances.

Beyond future employability, creative outlets offer immediate social and emotional benefits in the classroom, helping children build self-confidence, improve focus and find meaningful ways to express themselves alongside academic or sporting pursuits.

'It gives them employability skills, confidence-building skills [and] practical skills.'

[Female, Melbourne]

'It's that vision and problem-solving and to have a concept in your mind and work out how you're going to achieve it [in an] outside-the-box sort of way. I think it's really important for kids these days, with AI taking over a lot of the mathematical analytical kind of work, we're just gonna become that sort of artisan sort of community, I think, you know, where you're valued for your creativity that a computer can't necessarily give you, and your judgment.'

[Female, Regional Queensland, Cairns]

Arts and culture builds stronger communities

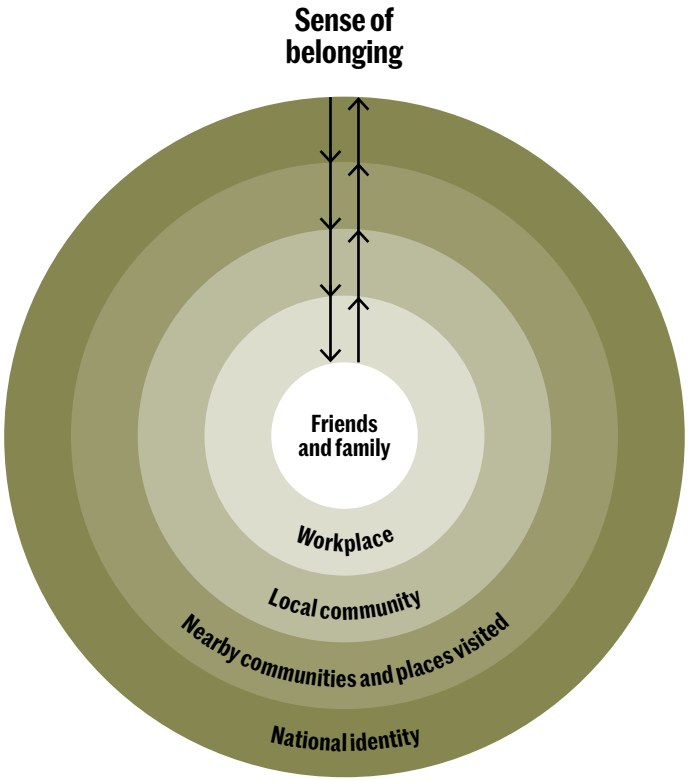
Middle Australians see arts and culture as one of the few things that brings people together across different backgrounds and experiences. At a time when Australians feel they are carrying more pressures than ever, arts and culture helps people connect, lifts spirits, creates joy and strengthens trust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

Across the 2026 focus groups, it was evident that arts and culture is viewed as essential social infrastructure that supports:

- activities together with friends and family
- interesting conversation starters at work
- a sense of belonging to the local community
- a reason to travel to other places and feel connected to other local communities
- a stronger sense of being part of a national identity.

Figure 1 visualises these layers of social infrastructure.

Figure 1: Contexts in which arts and culture promotes a sense of belonging as discussed by middle Australians



Participants consistently spoke about arts, culture and creativity as promoting connection:

> 'It can create a feeling of togetherness and belonging, something that brings people together through a shared activity.'
>
> **[Female, Melbourne]**

Along with valuing local offerings, a subset of the participants also referred to arts and culture as something that happens in specific locations – often locations that they are willing to travel to.[10] This suggests that arts and culture connects people and places.

> 'I think there's a lot of arts and stuff out [in] regional areas. Bendigo, Ballarat, all those kind of places have a lot of arts and crafts and galleries and painting exhibitions, that kind of thing. So it's good. You kind of, like, make [it] into a day trip or a weekend instead of just staying around the city.'
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

Regional participants highlighted aspects such as pride in place, showcasing their town, attracting visitors and tourists to their region, keeping young people local and community togetherness. They discussed the need for local arts and cultural opportunities to strengthen community and increase local revenue:

> '[People are] staying at hotels, caravan parks, going to local shops, cafes, all that sort of business, buying food and ... seeing other things whilst they're in attendance at that local festival.'
>
> **[Male, Regional Queensland, Cairns]**

Participants also connected Australian stories and cultural expression with national identity. They saw growing the recognition of Australia's First Nations heritage, multicultural character and regional stories as a way to strengthen belonging at home and represent Australia with confidence internationally.

'We've got that wonderful heritage of our First Nations as well. We've got that ancient culture, but there's also this vibrant multicultural feel to our country as well.'

[Female, Regional Queensland, Toowoomba]

'It should be preserved and nurtured even more, to ... showcase Australian value to the world.'

[Male, Melbourne]

These social connections and shared cultural experiences are felt most acutely at the local level, where geography and infrastructure shape how communities come together, as discussed in **Box 3**.

Box 3: A nation of neighbourhoods – growth areas and regional Australia

Neighbourhoods are the building blocks of the nation. What happens on a single street, in a single town, ripples outward into how Australia understands itself – while national pressures like housing, climate, education and health land differently depending on the place you call home. This is where the local and the national meet. Issues that play out in neighbourhoods are often symptoms of forces shaping the whole country; in turn, how we respond in place shapes national conversations.

Growth areas and **regional Australia** both illustrate this dynamic vividly. They each grapple with distinct pressures and opportunities that demand place-based responses grounded in a shared national commitment to connection and belonging.

Growth areas[11] are fast-growing outer metropolitan cities and suburbs, defined by rapid population growth that outpaces the ability to deliver social, cultural and civic infrastructure.[12] They have high proportions of children and young people, significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity.[13] With birth rates higher than the national average, one in four Australian children already live in growth areas.[14]

This comes with opportunities and challenges. The National Growth Areas Alliance has highlighted that when 'new suburbs grow quickly and large numbers of residents arrive to begin their lives in new neighbourhoods, deliberate effort and investment is required to ensure a positive and cohesive community identity can form. Long-term inequitable infrastructure funding in Growth Areas continues to place our communities at risk of disadvantage and their potential unfilled.'[15]

For example, analysis by the Australian Urban Observatory shows that fewer than half (44%) of households in growth areas have good access to cultural venues such as libraries, cinemas, theatres, museums and galleries.[16] This compares to 70% of households in non-growth areas.

Regional Australia has its own challenges and opportunities. More than one quarter of Australia's population live in regional areas.[17] Regional Australians often face poorer health outcomes, living shorter lives and having less access to services than those in metropolitan areas.[18] The impacts of climate change are being felt through bushfire, drought and other natural disasters. These events are redefining what it means to live in regional Australia, and communities are working hard to adapt.[19] Many regional areas are experiencing a lack of necessary skills and difficulty attracting and retaining workers. These labour shortages severely impact the growth prospects of regional businesses and industries.[20] Arts, culture and creativity have an important role to play in addressing these challenges.

Australians face real barriers to access

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

Middle Australians identified five interacting categories of enablers and barriers: financial, transport, accessibility, logistical and perceptual. **Figure 2** shows that participation depends not only on ticket price but on the total cost, effort, confidence and safety involved in taking part.

Figure 2: Five categories relating to participation as discussed by middle Australians

Enablers (positive pull)	Category	Barriers (negative push)
Affordable • Free and low-cost options • Gifted tickets	↑ **Financial** ↓	**Cost-prohibitive** • Cost of living and high expenses • Connected costs (e.g. parking, food, accommodation)
Transit ease • Convenient transport • Novelty transit options (e.g. ferry)	↑ **Transport** ↓	**Transit friction** • Parking and road issues • High fuel costs • Long distance
Welcoming and inclusive • Inclusive spaces • Good accessibility • Child- and family-friendly activities	↑ **Accessibility** ↓	**Unwelcoming and inaccessible** • Poor accessibility • Not family-friendly • Unsuitable venues (e.g. size not appropriate for event type)
Easy • Effortless attendance • Ready availability	↑ **Logistical** ↓	**Difficult** • Lack of availability • Time scarcity • Adverse weather • Structural barriers (e.g. childcare considerations)
Low friction • Strong awareness • High familiarity • Accessible information	↑ **Perceptual** ↓	**High friction** • Cultural reasons • Lack of interest • Unfamiliarity • Negative attitudes • Too crowded • Hassle • Decision fatigue • Feeling unsafe

Finding free and low-cost options was discussed consistently across the focus groups:

> 'Everyone's looking for free things to do, things that are free, [or something that] doesn't cost you an arm and leg.'
>
> **[Female, Sydney]**

For several participants with families, especially those on single incomes, costs associated with attending arts and cultural events felt out of reach:

> 'We've been just single, you know, for our family, single income for a few years, so yeah, it was just any sort of big event was sort of beyond us.'
>
> **[Male, Brisbane]**

Alongside the quest for cost-efficient options was consideration of the connected costs of attendance:

> 'Even if an event is free, there's still the transport, you're eating out, and food's expensive. So it's all the other stuff that goes with it has increased the cost.'
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

One of the incidental costs highlighted by participants was parking:

> 'Along with the cost of everything, a lot of inner-city councils have introduced paid metered parking. And reduced the amount of on-street parking, and at night-time, that's a big disincentive. I don't mind catching the trains around Melbourne during the day, but at night, just wanted to jump in your car and go somewhere, and now it's much harder.'
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

In some cases, themes such as transit, crowds and concerns about drug and alcohol consumption revealed an underlying concern about safety:

> 'I just hate being in the city … it scares me. I hate driving there, I hate … even, like, with the train, you don't want to be on the train at a certain time of night, like I just don't feel safe.'
>
> **[Female, Perth]**

Another participant from the same group expressed safety concerns connected to prolonged reconstruction projects and street homelessness, which the participant suspected could impact attendance at arts and cultural events.

Aside from the personal barriers already mentioned, another concern discussed in several focus groups was the impact of the cost of living and increased regulatory hurdles for providers:

> '[In] the last few years … a lot of music festivals, especially rural, closed down. […] I do know that a lot of people got impacted by this.'
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

> 'Because the permits and insurance is definitely one of the bigger issues with just simply putting on the event.'
>
> **[Female, Sydney]**

One of the barriers most obviously apparent to participants was the impact of the cost of living. **Box 4** (overleaf) explores the cost-of-living crisis more broadly as well as its impacts on arts, culture and creativity.

Box 4: The cost-of-living crisis and its impacts on arts, culture and creativity

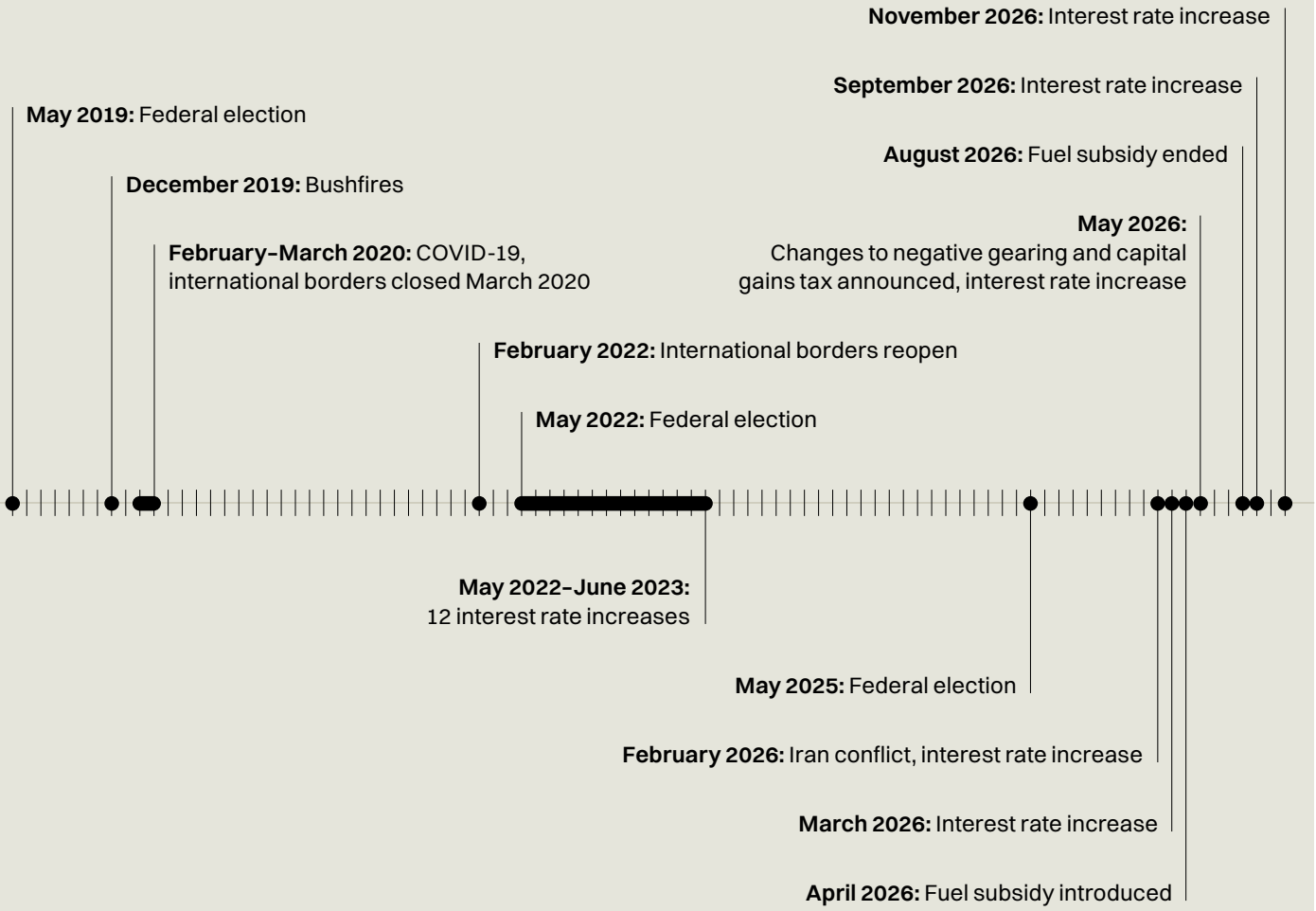
High inflation, rising housing and rental costs, and elevated interest rates from 2022 to 2026 have created sustained household financial pressure. Australians have become far more deliberate in their discretionary spending, with mortgage holders, regional communities and low-income households generally seen as being most vulnerable.[21]

Inflation has seen the cost of essential goods and services increase faster than real wages. This has been compounded by 'war in the Middle East, supply chain disruptions, a national decline in productivity, a housing crisis and bracket creep', leading to a cost-of-living crisis in Australia that cuts both deep and wide.[22]

The latest National Arts Participation Survey by Creative Australia found that:[23]

- across all art forms, more Australians reported cost as a barrier in 2025 (60%) than did in 2022 (55%)
- more than half (55%) of Australians did not attend an arts and culture event because of the cost in 2025.

Figure 3: A timeline of select events relevant to the cost-of-living crisis that have occurred during the Middle Australia research series, 2019–2026



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.

Participants discussed how governments should enable arts, culture and creativity. Prompts included questions about voucher schemes, cultural infrastructure, tax concessions, reduced red tape and increased information about events. All levels of government were discussed.

Reducing red tape, such as streamlining permit approvals and improving access to insurance, was a recurring priority for participants. Insurance and permitting were specifically highlighted as major barriers:

> 'It is never going to be equitable for all the different groups. So if you can do a generalised thing like making event spaces more accessible or bringing down the permit, you know, making it easier for permit approval or insurance or whatever. So that's a general thing that can be used by anyone.'
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

> 'Festivals are falling over left, right, and centre because of exploding insurance costs. Now, no individual's going to pick that up. Governments have to go, well, this is a good thing for society.'
>
> **[Male, Regional Queensland, Cairns]**

One participant suggested that reducing red tape is a cost-neutral option for taxpayers:

> 'I think you can always be cost-neutral to taxpayers. I also think they could get a bit creative about what they do. So, as an example, you could have a permit for this festival for this week. These are the conditions the rest of the year. You can't do these things, or the noise limit is here, or whatever it is. But for this reason, for this period of time, or this weekend, they relaxed [the conditions].'
>
> **[Male, Brisbane]**

Regarding existing cultural infrastructure (libraries, galleries, museums and parks), participants strongly supported maximising current assets, discounting entry costs and offering local participation options:

> 'I think making libraries and parks available, and [supporting] cultural organisations, [is] really important.'
>
> **[Female, Perth]**

> 'Making the museums, festivals, galleries either free or discounted would help.'
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

Middle Australians highlighted accessible information and government promotion of arts and cultural events and activities as key enablers of participation, even for privately financed events.

State and territory sponsored voucher schemes were supported to encourage creative participation alongside sports for young people:

> ‘That kind of feeds back into helping young people engage in these things, but also showing the government’s value of that. And having that be something that’s normalised for young people.’
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

While voucher schemes differ across jurisdictions, with some being means-tested, one participant noted that vouchers should target underprivileged children to improve access to cultural experiences outside of school:

> ‘I’m talking about underprivileged children, to be able to, you know, get cultural experiences. Because of their background they may not be able to do it outside of school.’
>
> **[Female, Perth]**

Similarly, providing free musical instruments in schools was supported to improve equity and assist with cognitive and behavioural development:

> ‘I’ve got one ADHD kid, and it was a great way for her to continue with music for self-regulation and focus … Music can be a way for them to manage their concentration, focus and give some quiet time in the classroom.’
>
> **[Female, Melbourne]**

Discounted or free transport was identified as another key priority to lower cost-of-living barriers and encourage people to explore new events:

> ‘I think two months it was free over summer. I would, on weekends, go around to different places that showcase different art and all, and all different events and such. It was really accessible, and you can go to places that you haven’t actually been to.’
>
> **[Male, Melbourne]**

Reflecting on these broader perspectives, participants in Brisbane specifically highlighted the impact of Queensland’s 50-cent public transport fares introduced in August 2024. For several respondents, reduced fares directly enhanced mobility and spontaneous engagement with city activities:

> ‘It’s been a bit of a game-changer because, you know, just the sheer cost of commuting throughout the week, you know, it adds up.’
>
> **[Male, Brisbane]**

Conversely, for other participants – particularly parents – discounted transport alone was insufficient to overcome broader logistical and structural friction:

> ‘If something’s hard to get to, and I’ll give you an example, like if there’s something on around West End now, I think, oh, I couldn’t be bothered to go there because I just can’t get a park. I mean, I know you can go on the public transport for 50 cents, but sometimes it’s just too hard. Or it’s out of the way, or I don’t know. People tend to do things that are easier if we make it easy for them.’
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

While discounted transport effectively alleviates cost pressures for some, these insights suggest that financial incentives alone do not address non-monetary barriers such as transit frequency, safety, convenience or physical accessibility.

Finally, when planning cultural tourism, one participant emphasised prioritising local residents and community connection over long-term major events:

> ‘We should focus on … our residents here, who really connect to each other, rebuilding our community where we belong.’
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

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.

Across the *Middle Australia* series, participants have consistently described arts, culture and creativity as part of everyday life, even when they do not initially describe events and activities using those terms. The 2026 discussions reinforce this pattern:

> 'I think it's everywhere. Like, even people who say they're into sport, right? Well, then you break it down though, they love a certain [athlete], they've watched a documentary, they're watching cinematography ... Sport has arts in it too.'
>
> **[Male, Sydney]**

This gap between lived participation and public language matters: what people do not recognise as cultural activity can be overlooked in policy, measurement and public debate. How middle Australians define arts, culture and creativity shapes how they value and view their own participation.

The research findings indicate that middle Australians hold broad personal definitions of arts, culture and creativity, with strong consistency across the *Middle Australia* series. Initial descriptions of 'arts' remain relatively narrow and are frequently associated with traditional institutions like galleries, museums and theatre. Conversely, 'culture' evokes broad concepts of community, food, festivals, diversity and shared experiences.

Together, the term 'arts and culture' continues to be stronger than either word on its own and creates a far more inclusive concept for participants.

Meanwhile, 'creativity' is viewed as both intersecting with arts and culture and extending into daily life, problem-solving and non-conventional thinking:

> 'Creativity doesn't have to just apply to being able to craft something. Creativity can be how to feed yourself.'
>
> **[Female, Regional Queensland, Townsville]**

When participants were prompted with a list of possible inclusions, the types of activities most frequently omitted from personal definitions of arts and culture included commercial radio, public broadcasters, phone gaming, circus, libraries, national parks, heritage sites and war memorials. Activities were excluded primarily when perceived as overly commercial, purely entertainment-focused, political or non-artistic (e.g. 'just books' or 'nature').

It is important to note that all groups showed some divergence amongst participants as to what was included. Participants were encouraged to share why some things were included or excluded from their personal definitions.

One example that led to nuanced discussion in over half of the focus groups was libraries, which included consideration of both local libraries and state and territory libraries. While some participants viewed libraries as a resource, a place of historical significance and a place to study, others saw them as lively and social cultural hubs:

> 'My local library, they have a garden there; they bring in all the food from the garden. They have all these things going on for the kids, they have workshops going on and all that. Sometimes I think you can't even go there to study anymore because it's too noisy. They're turning it into more of a community thing. Because of technology, things have changed. People are doing everything on computers, so they're having to reinvent themselves. And I think they're becoming more culturally creative and finding ways to get people to still come along.'
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

The findings also highlight that participants' definitions have expanded over time. For example, they were more inclined to include digital platforms like YouTube or TikTok in 2026 than in previous years:

> 'There is a lot of stuff on YouTube, obviously, and a lot of music and a lot of drawing classes … so there's heaps of art and culture there.'
>
> **[Female, Regional Queensland, Cairns]**

Throughout all focus groups, participants were quick to list both personal and societal benefits of arts and culture. The following themes arose regarding benefits at a personal level:

- improved mental health and wellbeing
- cognitive development and learning
- social connection
- self-expression
- entertainment
- broadened experiential horizons
- youth engagement.

At a societal level, participants identified economic and civic benefits including local spending, tourism, employment and national identity.

Across every iteration of the *Middle Australia* series, participants have described a world without arts, culture and creativity in social as well as emotional terms, using words such as 'colourless', 'unimaginative' and 'depressing'. The 2026 participants also indicated the impacts of greater isolation and less tolerance:

> 'We would probably lose a bit of empathy, I imagine. Sometimes it shows us things that we may not normally see.'
>
> **[Male, Sydney]**
>
> 'If you just go to work, come home, and there's no entertainment … you're sort of just a factory worker. You go home, you sleep, you go back to work.'
>
> **[Male, Perth]**

Focus group discussions further demonstrate that middle Australians engage in a much broader range of creative activities in their daily lives than they initially recognise. When reflecting on personal hobbies, some participants linked daily creative practice to individual wellbeing, cognitive health and community connection:

> 'I'm learning to crochet at the moment. I love watercolour … I know that's helpful for our brains because of my job. And then it also kind of is that even though [I'm] doing it myself [it] creates that connection with other people when you connect online or with friends around it as well.'
>
> **[Female, Brisbane]**

This level of participation is also seen in the most recent data about Australian engagement in arts and culture, as **Box 5** (overleaf) explores.

Box 5: What does the data tell us about participation?

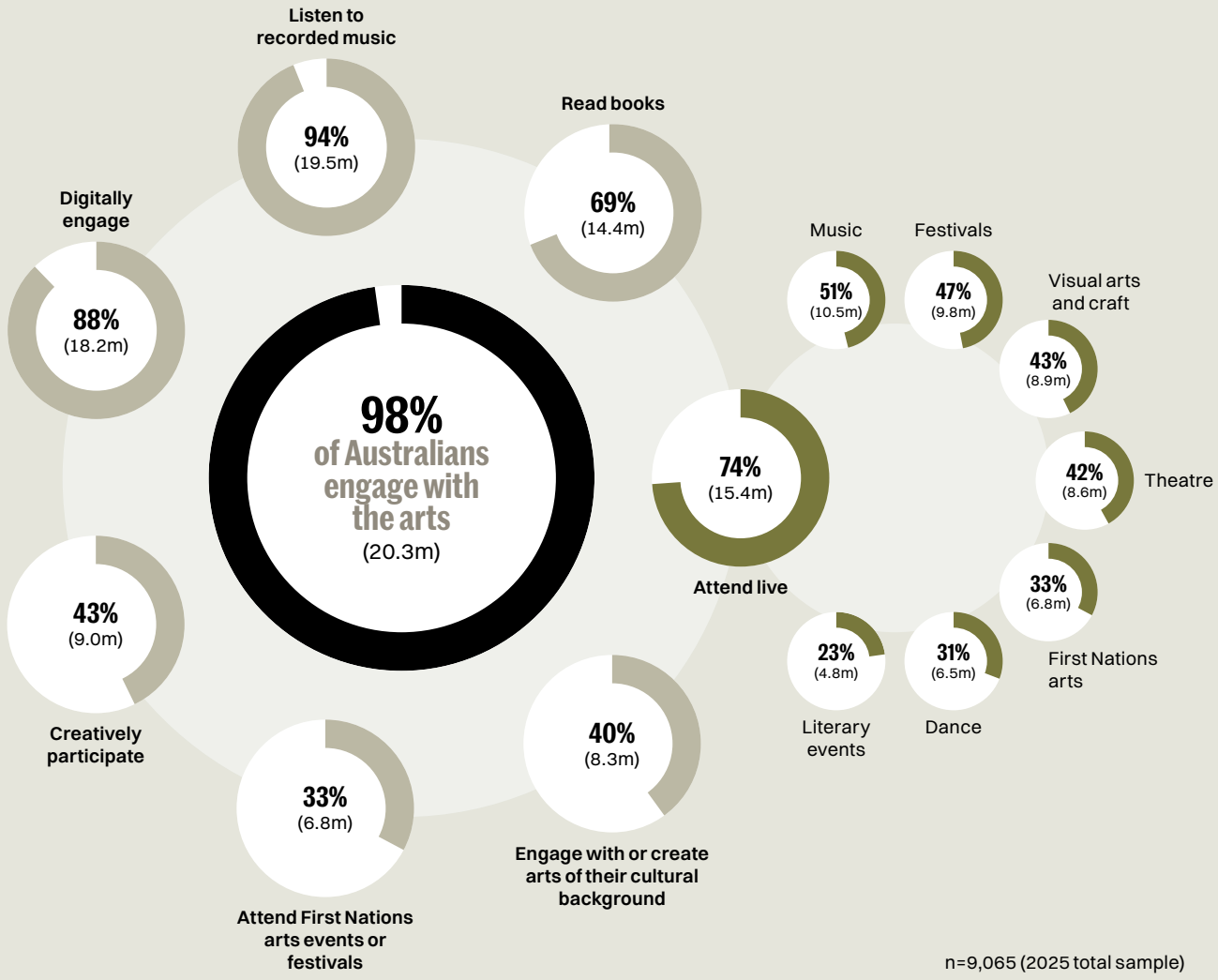
The latest release from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows very high levels of engagement with arts and culture:

- 79% of Australians attended cultural venues or events in the 12 months prior to the survey in 2025.[24]
- 48% participated in cultural activities in the 12 months prior to the survey in 2025.[25]

This is echoed by the latest edition of Creative Australia's National Arts Participation Survey, which found that:[26]

- nearly every Australian engages with the arts, including by listening to music, reading, creating art, engaging with the arts online or attending arts and cultural events and festivals
- 2025 had the highest recorded level of attendance for live arts events and festivals.

Figure 4: Australians' engagement with the arts in 2025



Source: Creative Australia, *Creative Transformations: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, page 11 (Figure 1), https://creative.gov.au/sites/creative-australia/files/documents/2026-06/National%20Arts%20Participation%20Survey%20Results%202025_FA%20TAGGED_0.pdf.

Opportunities

Middle Australians see arts, culture and creativity as relevant to their children, work, communities and access to opportunity. They see creativity as essential to preparing young people for work alongside technology and AI, generating jobs and local economic activity, and building stronger, more connected communities. It is more than a 'nice to have'; it is an economic capability supporting innovation, entrepreneurship, tourism and local spending.

The data supports this, with nearly four in five Australians attending cultural venues or events annually,[27] while cultural and creative activity contributed $70.3 billion (2.5% of GDP) to the Australian economy in 2024–25.[28]

ANA's research reveals a strong and practical case for action in five areas:

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

Middle Australians favour practical measures that widen access and strengthen the systems supporting cultural activity. Their support is strongest when government action is accessible, relevant to everyday life and focused on enabling participation – not choosing which forms of culture people should value.

Together, these priorities offer governments a focused and credible reform agenda. This approach addresses core concerns that middle Australians express about their children's futures, changing work, cost-of-living pressures, unequal access and weakening community connection. These priorities position arts and culture as a national capability that can help governments deliver stronger economic, social and community outcomes. Middle Australians do not view arts and culture in isolation; they connect it to their children's futures, the skills needed in a changing economy, stronger communities, local jobs and fair access to opportunity.

Governments at all levels – local, state and territory, and federal – can act on these areas. In the immediate future, these opportunities create a focused agenda for the next National Cultural Policy and for targeted actions across the three tiers of government. Longer term, they provide the necessary focus to contribute directly to education, productivity, regional development, social cohesion and more effective use of public and private investment – ultimately turning an activity Australians already value into a deliberate national advantage.

Each of the five areas are outlined in the following sections.

Children and young people

For Middle Australians, the strongest case for arts and culture begins with children. They believe creative participation builds the capabilities young people need to flourish in life and succeed at work: confidence, resilience, communication, empathy and imagination.

Middle Australians make it clear that arts and cultural education should be treated as part of developing capable adults, not merely producing professional artists. Their views align with evidence linking arts participation and education with creativity, confidence, critical thinking, empathy, communication and adaptability. As AI changes the tasks people perform, these human capabilities will become increasingly important to Australia's workforce and wider society.[29]

Governments should act because access to these opportunities is often determined by family income, familiarity, transport and where a child lives. Ensuring more children can participate is an investment in educational engagement, future workforce capability and more equal opportunity. This makes supporting children, young people, education and training a shared priority that cuts across all levels and areas of government. It is not a cultural portfolio issue alone.

Governments should pursue the following practical actions:

- **Guarantee every Australian school student access to impactful arts and cultural education.**
  This should include a national in-school arts program,[30] expanded Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) eligibility for cultural institutions,[31] an annual guaranteed cultural experience for every child[32] and lasting partnerships between schools and the creative sector.[33]
- **Increase youth participation in arts and culture leadership.**
  Young people should be engaged in the work of arts and cultural organisations through leadership roles and opportunities. This not only develops young people's skills and confidence, it also supports greater age diversity and leadership sustainability of arts and cultural organisations. Governments can support this, for example, by implementing legislation that requires cultural institutions to have young people on their boards. This could be modelled on the design and implementation of the *Cultural Institutions Legislation Amendment Act 2025* (NSW).[34]
- **Make children's activity vouchers activity-agnostic to include arts and culture.**
  Existing state and territory activity voucher schemes (currently focused on sport and limited forms of creative activity) should be expanded so children and young people can use them for any form of arts and cultural participation, including theatre, music, dance, drama and visual arts.[35]

Careers, skills and training

Middle Australians see creativity as an economic capability, not simply an artistic one. As technology and AI reshape work, the ability to generate ideas, communicate, adapt and solve problems will become increasingly valuable.

Governments should act because Australia's future productivity and competitiveness will depend on developing these capabilities and creating clearer pathways between education, training, employment and industry. Skills, training and industrial policies can help build a more adaptable workforce while supporting jobs, businesses and economic activity across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia.

Governments should pursue the following actions:

- **Create training and skills pathways that build a workforce for the future.**
  This should include commissioning a national creative workforce and skills-gap analysis; engaging every jurisdiction to identify priority creative qualifications for Free TAFE; and embedding creativity, design and communication into national skills priorities, vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and industry workforce plans.[36]

- **Develop an industrial strategy for Australia's creative industries to support economy-wide creativity capability.**
  This should be focused on the economic value of arts, culture and creativity and provide commitments and incentives that drive investment, growth and employment. Creativity should be recognised as an economy-wide capability supporting innovation, design, entrepreneurship, problem-solving and effective engagement with technology and AI. Creative enterprises should have explicit access to mainstream business and industry programs. The experience of the UK in the creation and implementation of its Creative Industries Sector Plan should help inform this approach. This positions the creative industries 'at the forefront of tackling the challenges of our era – from managing the rise of new technologies to building a resilient, skilled and diverse workforce.' [37]

Building social cohesion and stronger communities

Middle Australians see arts and culture as a force capable of bringing people together across backgrounds, places and generations – creating connection, mutual understanding and a stronger sense of belonging. At a time of increasing division, declining trust and growing pressure on communities, this role matters.

Social cohesion depends on places, institutions and activities that allow people to meet, participate and build trust. Cultural infrastructure includes physical spaces, local networks, information, creative capability and platforms for community stories.

Recognising arts and culture as community infrastructure, and connecting it with place-making, regional development, education, health and wellbeing, can help build stronger, more cohesive communities able to create, share and participate in cultural experiences that reflect their identities and aspirations.

Governments can strengthen this infrastructure through planning, commissioning, better use of public assets and place-based partnerships that give communities a meaningful role in shaping local cultural life.

Practical actions for local, state and territory, and federal governments to pursue include:

- **Treat cultural infrastructure as essential community and economic infrastructure.**
  This should include legislating planning requirements for major urban renewal and residential development projects to provide for community cultural space from the outset. It should be accompanied by a national map of cultural infrastructure and minimum planning and service standards to identify and fix cultural infrastructure deserts and ensure underutilised public infrastructure assets are made available.
- **Build coalitions of the willing to strengthen social cohesion and community trust.**
  Governments should bring together schools, local governments, arts organisations, First Nations community-controlled organisations, libraries, cultural institutions, businesses and philanthropists to design place-based priorities, share resources and coordinate investment. Regional agreements can be piloted in growth areas and regional communities. These coalitions should speak with many voices but advance a consistent story: cultural participation strengthens place, opportunity and belonging.
- **Champion Australian stories so all Australians can see their lives, histories and communities reflected as part of our national identity.**
  Local, state and territory, and federal governments should mandate the inclusion of Australian content and commissioning across the arts, culture and creativity work that they fund, including publicly funded broadcasters, festivals, collecting institutions and major government-supported events. This could be achieved through establishing a national Living Stories program that supports First Nations cultural practice, multicultural and migrant stories, regional histories and intergenerational community storytelling, all of which reflect the diversity of contemporary Australia.

Removing barriers and enabling participation

Middle Australians value arts and culture, but practical barriers are making participation harder than it should be. Cost, transport, parking, distance and difficulty finding clear information are excluding people, particularly families under financial pressure and those living outside major cities. These barriers make cultural participation an issue of fairness and opportunity, not simply personal choice.

Middle Australians show strong interest in free, low-cost and local creative experiences. They also want governments to support the systems that make cultural participation possible. The policy implications are clear: publicly supported cultural opportunities should be designed for broad participation, not experienced as exclusive luxuries. Governments should use the settings they control to ensure cultural activity is easy to create, finance, insure, approve, discover and attend.

Governments should act because unequal access limits the public value of existing investment in institutions, venues, programs and public spaces. Broader participation can improve the return on that investment, strengthen local economies and tourism, and ensure cultural opportunities reach more Australians. Middle Australians want governments to make opportunities easier to find, reach and afford, improve access to existing infrastructure and enable communities to participate in the activities that matter to them.

There are practical steps that local, state and territory, and federal governments can take:

- **Guarantee affordable cultural participation close to home through publicly funded institutions and services.**
  Given that governments own or fund a significant proportion of Australia's cultural infrastructure, they should identify ways to reduce cost and access barriers so all Australians, particularly families facing cost-of-living pressures, can participate in arts and culture through free or discounted general admission. This should be further supported by transport interventions (including discounted travel and better-coordinated services) to reduce transport barriers, as well as information platforms to help people discover, book and access local cultural events and activities.
- **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. This could include measures that require community-driven programming to support greater diversity of stories as well as those that remove cost barriers. Any new payment or incentive should be time-limited, costed and evaluated for additional attendance, equity and audience retention before wider adoption. Governments should consider incentives that provide match-contributions and other ways to encourage sustainable private investment in the system.
- **Cut red tape so it's easier to create and invest in cultural activity.**
  Governments at all levels have a critical role to play in streamlining arts and culture investment and approval processes so effort is proportionate to value. For local, state and territory governments, this should include a single cultural-events approval pathway with one application; a lead agency and guaranteed decision timeframes; a one-stop shop for permits, programs and venues; streamlined insurance and permit requirements; and pro-culture procurement guidance and standard artist contracts covering fair payment, copyright, cancellation, insurance and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property.
- **Reform tax, philanthropic and data settings to support a vibrant arts and culture system.**
  If designed well, these settings can optimise financial inflows into the arts, culture and creativity system.[38] The Australian Government should include a cultural taxation review in the next National Cultural Policy while pursuing early reforms such as clearer Australian Taxation Office guidance, tax-free treatment of qualifying prizes and grants, a standard deduction for artists and targeted education for tax professionals. All levels of government should work collaboratively to strengthen the evidence base by publishing Cultural Funding by Government data annually and at a more granular level, and by developing and piloting data-driven funding models that can reinforce and sustain high levels of cultural participation. Better tax and philanthropy settings can unlock private investment, reduce unnecessary administrative barriers and strengthen the sustainability of cultural activity. This would broaden responsibility for supporting Australia's cultural life and increase the impact of public investment without relying solely on additional government funding.

Government investment and coordination

Middle Australians describe arts, culture and creativity as embedded in daily life, with some finding it difficult to imagine life without it. Yet this breadth and depth of value and engagement are not reflected in the approach to government investment in the system.

The views of middle Australia point to a policy opportunity: treat arts, culture and creativity as an investment in Australia's social and economic wellbeing, not a burdensome expenditure.

A shared policy language would help governments coordinate action, measure public value and explain why reform matters beyond the cultural portfolio.

Priority actions include:

- **Increase investment in arts, culture and creativity to keep pace with population growth.**
  Australia's population increased by 27% between 2007–08 and 2023–24 to 27 million, while recurrent expenditure on arts and culture increased by 9.5%. Australian governments need to cover this lag in funding and ensure their ongoing investment keeps pace with the projected 15% population increase from 2024–25 to 2035–36. This means increasing recurrent expenditure by around 2.6% in real terms each year from 2024–25 until 2035–36, both to close the historical funding gap and keep pace with predicted population growth.[39]
- **Drive government investment through a National Partnership Agreement (NPA).**
  Federal, state and territory governments should sign a five-year NPA that commits to increasing arts and culture funding at least in line with population growth. Additional funding should be shared equally (50% federal and 50% state or territory) to preserve per capita investment, provide certainty and support equitable access. The NPA should establish funding baselines, prevent cost-shifting between governments and require annual public reporting. The Australian Local Government Association should seek equivalent commitments from councils, tailored to their population, financial capacity and local circumstances.
- **Adopt a shared national definition of arts, culture and creativity.**
  This definition should be adopted by local, state and territory, and federal governments in the next National Cultural Policy. It should incorporate:
  - attending arts, cultural and creative events
  - visiting arts, cultural and creative venues
  - creating or performing something
  - engaging with arts, cultural and creative content in everyday life
  - activities performed in industries and occupations that may be less obvious, such as advertising, design and architecture.
- **Develop a shared national vision for Australia's arts, culture and creativity system.**
  This should be agreed to by federal, state and territory, and local governments and have connected communities, lifelong learning and cultural access and participation at its heart.[40]
- **Implement a national cultural outcomes framework measuring the things that matter for everyday Australians.**
  These include participation, geographic and demographic reach, and arts and culture's impact on wellbeing, social connection, employment, children's development, tourism and local economic activity. This national framework should be used across local, state and territory, and federal governments.

Concluding Words

Middle Australians do not see arts, culture and creativity as a niche interest or a luxury enjoyed by a select few. Across 10 focus groups, participants described creativity as something that already shapes their children's futures, their prospects at work, the strength of their local communities and their own everyday sense of opportunity. This value is real, widely held and remarkably consistent, reinforcing findings observed across the *Middle Australia* series since 2020.

What middle Australians want from governments is equally clear. They are not asking governments to tell them what to value or which cultural forms deserve support. They are asking governments to make the creative life they already value easier to reach: to lower the cost of participation, reduce the transport and logistical friction that keeps families and regional communities away, cut the red tape that makes it harder to put on a local festival or community event, and make information about what's on offer easier to find.

This is a call for governments to enable rather than direct. It is also a call for coordination. The findings and opportunities in this report cut across the responsibilities of many portfolios and every level of government, including education, workforce and skills, regional development, social cohesion, tax and productivity, and arts and culture. No single agency or tier of government, acting alone, can capture the full value of creativity to middle Australians. A shared national vision, a shared definition and a shared measurement framework, all backed by a genuine funding partnership between federal, state and territory, and local governments, would allow that value to be captured and converted into a deliberate national capability.

The next National Cultural Policy offers a timely opportunity to act. The five opportunity areas set out in this report provide a focused agenda for change that can start right now, as well as a longer-term platform for building the economic, social and community outcomes that middle Australians say they want.

Middle Australians already live creative lives, whether or not they describe them as such. The task for governments now is to remove the barriers that stand in the way and to coordinate action so that Australia's creativity becomes not just something individuals quietly value, but a capability the nation strategically builds.

Acknowledgements

About A New Approach

ANA is Australia's national arts and culture think tank. Our work shapes and informs the views and actions of public policy decision-makers and key opinion leaders. ANA's ambition is for Australia's place as a cultural powerhouse to be secure, with an arts, culture and creativity system that delivers for all Australians by 2035. The scale of the opportunity of arts and culture is immense – it is a core driver of flourishing people, cohesive communities, resilient economies, productive nations and connected regions.

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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The opinions in this Insight Report do not necessarily represent the views of ANA's funding partners, the individual members involved in governance or advisory groups, or others who have provided input.

Large language models (LLMs) were used to edit and refine this report. ANA staff oversaw, reviewed and finalised all content developed by LLMs.

Any errors are our own. If you notice any errors, please get in contact using the details provided.

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The Insight series

This is ANA's 17th Insight Report and the fourth in the *Middle Australia* series. Our Insight Reports provide a deep dive into research and analysis of a particular arts and cultural policy topic or other area of interest.

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Appendices & Endnotes

Appendix 1: The *Middle Australia* series and other ANA research

This Insight Report is the fourth in ANA's *Middle Australia* series, with the first three reports published in 2020, 2021 and 2022.[41]

The *Middle Australia* series was initiated in 2020 to begin capturing attitudes and views about arts and culture among politically unaligned, middle-income Australians. The work continues to reveal how this broad demographic of voters define, value and participate in arts, culture and creativity and further explores what their expectations are of governments to enable their cultural experiences.

Other ANA work sets the scene for how we think about the role of government and the importance of understanding the arts, culture and creativity system:

- *Government, Culture and Creativity: It's about more than just funding.* This research examines the role of governments in Australia and what they can (and should) do. It considers the 'pro-culture' enablers that are (often uniquely) available to governments, including options that may prove to be cheaper, easier and more effective than direct funding.[42]
- *The arts, culture and creativity system in Australia: How it ticks.* This research provides an overview of Australia's arts, culture and creativity system and highlights 12 levers that can create effective systems change.[43]
- The *Big Picture* series. This tells the long-term story of cultural expenditure by Australian governments and identifies strategic and structural trends and opportunities for change.[44]

Appendix 2: Arts, culture and creativity definition

Arts, culture and creativity is the inclusive and broad umbrella term that ANA adopts for a range of activities such as attending cultural events; visiting cultural venues; creating or performing something; and engaging with arts, culture and creative content in everyday life. It also comprises activities performed in industries and occupations that may be less obvious, such as advertising, design and architecture.[45]

Figure 5 provides a visual of how ANA defines arts, culture and creativity.

Figure 5: What we mean by arts, culture and creativity



Appendix 3: Research design and methods

ANA commissioned specialist qualitative market research firm Visibility to complete the recruitment of participants, the data collection stage and an initial analysis that underpins this report.

Recruitment

Middle Australia is a descriptive rather than analytical term. As discussed in the Introduction, this cohort of 'middle Australians' had to meet the following criteria:

- All were either politically unaligned or were swing voters.
- All had a combined household income between $89,000 and $184,000. According to 2021 Census data, this equates to approximately one third of the Australian population.[46]
- All were aged between 35 and 59 years of age. According to Australian Electoral Commission count data, this equates to 42% of the voting population.[47]

Participants were drawn predominantly from marginal electorates in Greater Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Sydney and Regional Queensland.

In terms of the sample of participants recruited, a non-proportional quota sampling approach was used. Quota sampling involves development of a sample that is representative of key subgroups within a population by drawing a sample on the basis of estimations of selected factors. In this case, the factors used to narrow down the key subgroups included location, age and household income. This approach is pragmatic when seeking to achieve balance between representation of key subgroups within a population and practical challenges (e.g. resource limitations).[48]

Data collection

The data collection involved 10 focus groups, each containing five to seven individuals. There was a total of 62 participants.

As a research method, focus groups involve group discussion devoted to the research topic, with facilitators playing an active role in directing the discussion for data collection purposes.[49] One of the strengths of focus groups is in the types of interactions that occur and the resulting synergy. This is because participants 'both query each other and explain themselves to each other'.[50] This is especially valuable for uncovering insights into complex behaviours and underlying drivers.

Similar to the research method adopted in ANA's previous research in the *Middle Australia* series, it is also worth noting:

- The focus groups were split according to gender. This approach was exclusively aimed at unearthing richer, deeper and more honest insights by improving the rapport in the focus groups, rather than for any analytic or comparative purpose.
- Participants were not informed about what topic they would be discussing when they signed up to participate to avoid creating a bias in the sample towards people with strong views about arts and culture.

Each focus group lasted 90 minutes, during which time the group facilitator(s) used a discussion guide to generate dialogue about arts, culture and creativity. The discussion guide included various open-ended questions and prompts to create dynamic conversations about attitudes and views. The discussion guide centred around the following themes:

- Definitions of arts, culture and creativity.
  - Example questions: What are the first two words that come to your mind when you hear the words 'arts and culture'? How is the word 'arts' different from 'culture'? What about 'creativity' – what does it mean?
- The way participants value arts, culture and creativity, and the role it plays in their lives, as well as in the lives of their families, the community and the wider society.
  - Example questions: What are the types of events and activities that you think of when it comes to arts and culture? What are some of the things that you do? What are some benefits? What are some negative connotations? What do you get out of arts and culture personally, as a society or as a country? What do you imagine life would be like without arts, culture and creativity?
- Views and attitudes about the role of governments in enabling arts, culture and creativity.
  - Example questions: What are your expectations of what governments should be doing when it comes to making it possible for arts and culture to exist? This includes the local, state and territory, and federal levels.
- Observed enablers and barriers to participating in arts, culture and creativity.
  - Themes regarding enablers and barriers arose throughout the focus group discussions, often in conjunction with discussion about participation. These themes were identified throughout the analysis process.

The recordings of the focus group discussions were transcribed by Visibility, and the resulting transcripts were de-identified prior to being provided to ANA.

Demographic data

Sixty-two people took part in 10 focus groups. Of these:

- 52% were female and 48% were male
- 60% had dependent children living at home
- 28% spoke a language other than English at home
- 3% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Participants were identified as either politically unaligned or as swing voters in the recruitment process through two questions. These are listed in **Table 1** along with the two accepted responses and the percentage of participants that selected each response.

Table 1: Screening questions for identifying politically unaligned or swing voters

Screening question	Accepted response 1	Accepted response 2
Thinking about state and federal elections, which of the following best describes how you usually vote?	I regularly change my vote between Labor and LNP/Liberal/National **(n = 37%)**	I sometimes change my vote between Labor and LNP/Liberal/National **(n = 63%)**
How likely would you be to change your mind about who you would preference higher out of Labor and the Liberal–National Coalition at the next federal election?	Very likely to change **(n = 42%)**	Somewhat likely to change **(n = 58%)**

The focus groups were held online with participants from the following five locations across Australia: Greater Melbourne (23%), Greater Sydney (21%), Greater Perth (19%), Regional Queensland (19%) and Greater Brisbane (18%). The sample provided a combination of participants representing the most populous locations in Australia along with regional locations. The participants were drawn predominantly from marginal electorates.

Analysis

Initial analysis, including identifying overarching themes, was conducted by Visibility. Further thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted internally by ANA using Dedoose software.

A hybrid inductive and deductive approach was used in the thematic analysis. This meant that known overarching themes provided structure (i.e. deductive reasoning) while also allowing for exploration of new themes and building these specific observations into broad generalisations (i.e. inductive reasoning).[51] The themes occurring across all focus groups are highlighted in this report, while themes yielding surprising insight but which were not identified across all focus groups are also noted where appropriate.

The quotes presented throughout this report exemplify the kinds of things the participants were saying about specific themes. Using quotes when reporting findings is a common approach in qualitative research to support and illustrate claims.[52]

More information about the elements of research design in ANA's *Middle Australia* series can be found in:

- *A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of Arts, Culture and Creativity*[53]
- *The Next Generation of Voters: Young Middle Australians Talk Arts, Culture and Creativity*[54]
- *Lifelong: Perceptions of Arts and Culture among Baby Boomer Middle Australians.*[55]

Appendix 4: How to use this report

This report is designed to help decision-makers, community leaders and advocates understand how middle Australians talk about arts, culture and creativity – and to translate that insight into policy, investment and public communication.

For elected members and policy advisers	Use this report to understand what middle Australians value, the barriers they experience and the language that makes government action relevant to daily life. It can support cross-portfolio discussions about education, skills, productivity, regional development and social cohesion as well as help frame reforms as practical responses to public priorities rather than isolated sector requests.
For cultural and creative organisations and individuals	This report can be used to gain new insights into the attitudes and priorities of a group of consumers you may not previously have targeted. It might assist you in considering new markets, new types of engagement and new ways to understand the relevance of what you do. It may also assist in preparing advocacy documents and grant applications.
For philanthropists and sponsors of arts and culture	This report can be used to gain an up-to-date understanding of the arts, cultural and creative activities most valued by middle Australians. This may assist in initiating strategic discussions about what investments may be relevant or most crucial to your desired outcomes.
For researchers and educators	Use this report as a qualitative source on middle Australians' engagement with arts, culture and creativity. It may assist you in identifying areas of further inquiry.
For the media, content creators and platforms for creative content	Use this report to understand the attitudes of middle Australians towards arts, culture and creativity. Contact ANA about media opportunities using the details on page 28.
For international audiences	Use this report as a current qualitative account of how middle Australians define and value arts, culture and creativity and how they understand the role of government. The findings may inform carefully designed international comparisons.

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.

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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.

5 This is the fourth Insight Report in ANA's *Middle Australia* series. More information about the series and other ANA work is in the Appendices.

6 For detail about the sample, data collection and analysis refer to the Appendices.

7 Commonwealth of Australia, *Revive: A Place for Every Story, a Story for Every Place—Australia's Cultural Policy for the Next Five Years* (January 2023), https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/national-cultural-policy-revive-place-every-story-story-every-place.

8 Commonwealth of Australia, Office for the Arts, 'A New National Cultural Policy,' accessed 8 September 2026, https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/new-national-cultural-policy.

9 Kate Fielding, Angela Vivian, and Sari Rossi, *Accelerate: Reframing Culture's Role in Productivity*, Insight Report no. 2023-03 (Canberra: A New Approach, 2023), https://newapproach.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ANA-Accelerate_-Productivity-Insight-Report-2023.pdf; A New Approach, 'Culture and Creativity: The Productivity Gains Hiding in Plain Sight,' August 2025, https://newapproach.org.au/publication/culture-and-creativity-the-productivity-gains-hiding-in-plain-sight/.

10 Existing research that validates the idea that arts and culture may be prominent in certain locations includes the research project *'Australian cultural and creative activity: A population and hotspot analysis'* which explored locations in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia. See: QUT, *Australian Cultural and Creative Activity: A Population and Hotspot Analysis*, accessed 10 September 2026, https://research.qut.edu.au/creativehotspots/about/.

11 Growth areas are defined by the National Growth Areas Alliance as 'Australia's fast-growing outer metropolitan cities and suburbs'. They represent a population of more than 5 million people, including 25% of Australia's children. Population growth rates in these areas are more than double the national average. See: National Growth Areas Alliance, 'About Us,' accessed 1 September 2026, https://www.ngaa.org.au/about.

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13 National Growth Areas Alliance, 'NGAA Submission,' 7.

14 National Growth Areas Alliance, 'NGAA Submission,' 7.

15 National Growth Areas Alliance, 'NGAA Submission,' 4.

16 National Growth Areas Alliance, 'NGAA Submission,' 19.

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23 Creative Australia, 'Creative Transformations: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey,' accessed 1 September 2026, 6, https://creative.gov.au/research/creative-transformations-results-national-arts-participation-survey.

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29 Jobs and Skills Australia, *Generative AI Capacity Study: Final Report Overview* (Canberra: Australian Government, August 2025), https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/generative-ai-capacity-study-report.

30 This should expand delivery of specialist in-school arts education programs to be a national program. This will draw from cultural and creative sector expertise and create benefits for children, schools, communities and local cultural and creative industries. A New Approach, 'Towards a New National Cultural Policy,' submission, May 22, 2026, https://newapproach.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ANA-submission-Next-National-Cultural-Policy-May-2026.pdf.

31 Adding additional cultural institutions to the list of institutions in the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program. Currently, national cultural institutions (including the National Museum of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia) are only eligible for PACER if the mandatory institutions (Parliament House, the Museum of Australian Democracy, National Electoral Education Centre and the Australian War Memorial) are fully booked and cannot accommodate a visiting school group. The Australian Government should expand PACER eligibility to allow for greater flexibility in location choice, increasing student access to arts and culture education in the context of civics education. See: A New Approach, *Opportunity to Action.*

32 Every student should have at least one externally delivered cultural experience in every year of schooling. One example of an externally delivered cultural experience is the Song Room Program. The Song Room have a range of offerings for education settings, frequently working in partnership with schools to deliver catered arts education programs. See: The Song Room, 'Our Programs,' accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.songroom.org.au/our-programs/at-a-glance/. Another example is the embedding of mandatory live cultural experiences in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Drama and Theatre Studies curriculum. The VCE prescribes live works for senior secondary Drama and Theatre Studies. Since students attend the approved performances with the regular public, the Playlist is a great way for young people to experience live theatre and also helps companies grow their audiences. The Playlist shows how curriculum requirements can support cultural participation and deliver benefits across education and the arts sector. See: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 'Planning,' accessed 1 September 2026, https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/vce-curriculum/vce-study-designs/drama/planning.

33 Establish partnerships through which artists and cultural organisations provide school performances, workshops, exhibitions and creative projects. One example is Creative Learning Partnerships, a collaboration between Creative Victoria and the Department of Education. See: Creative Victoria, 'Creative Learning Partnerships,' accessed 11 September 2026, https://creative.vic.gov.au/funding-opportunities/find-a-funding-opportunity/creative-learning-partnerships.

34 A New Approach, 'Towards a New National Cultural Policy.'.

35 A New Approach, *Opportunity to Action.*

36 Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) found in its 2025 Creative Workforce Scoping Study Report that 'Australia's creative industries are facing critical workforce and skills shortages' and that these shortages exist across technical and business roles. The SaCSA study only looked at six sectors - performing arts, visual arts, craft and design, writing and publishing, digital games, screen and music. This only represents a portion of the wider creative workforce. See: Service and Creative Skills Australia, *Creative Workforce Scoping Study Report: Addressing the Challenges with Critical Skills and Sustainable Careers—Full Report* (2025), 19, 58–59.

37 Government UK, 'Creative Industries Sector Plan,' accessed 27 August 2026, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-sector-plan.

38 The New South Wales (NSW) Government has led exploratory work on tax reform opportunities. See: NSW Government, 'The Art of Tax Reform: Unlocking Opportunities to Improve Taxation for Australian Creative Industries,' accessed 7 October 2026, https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/dciths/art-of-tax-reform-summit.

39 This amount was calculated using cultural expenditure and population growth projection datapoints. For cultural expenditure, the recurrent amounts were used rather than total expenditure. This was to avoid including fluctuating capital expenditure highs and lows. These datapoints were sourced from: Australian Government, Centre for Population, 'Population Statement: National Population Projections, 2024–25 to 2035–36,' January 2026, https://population.gov.au/data-and-forecasts/projections ; A New Approach, 'The Big Picture: Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative Activity by Governments in Australia in 2007–08 to 2023–24,' interactive report, accessed 10 July 2026, https://thebigpicture.newapproach.org.au/.

40 ANA research shows that creating a shared goal or vision for a system is one of the most powerful leverage points to create change. Aligning work, resources and commitment around a shared vision amplifies effort and builds collaboration. Refer to Finding 2 in: Angela Vivian and Kate Fielding, *The Arts, Culture and Creativity System in Australia: How It Ticks*, Insight Report no. 2025–02 (Canberra: A New Approach, 2025), 9, https://newapproach.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/A-New-Approach-Insight-Report-The-arts-culture-and-creativity-system-in-Australia-2025.pdf; A New Approach, 'Towards a New National Cultural Policy.'

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50 Morgan, 'Focus Groups,' 139.

51 Kevin Proudfoot, 'Inductive/Deductive Hybrid Thematic Analysis in Mixed Methods Research,' *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 17, no. 3 (2023): 308–26.

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