Australian Youth Orchestra submission to the National Cultural Policy

21 May, 2026

1. Introduction

Who we are

The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO) is a national cultural institution with a long-standing responsibility for developing Australia's next generation of musicians, cultural leaders and engaged audiences. With nearly eight decades of continuous operation, AYO has played a formative role in shaping Australia's musical life and cultural capability across generations.

AYO is one of the Australian Government supported Arts8 — the eight national performing arts training organisations that collectively underpin elite artistic training, workforce renewal and cultural excellence across disciplines. Within this national framework, AYO's role extends beyond orchestral training to stewardship of talent pathways, partnerships and public value over the long term.

AYO works across education, training, performance and engagement, connecting schools, community ensembles, youth organisations, tertiary providers, professional companies and audiences. This places us at a point in the system where early access, learning quality and pathway design translate directly into outcomes many years later.

Because of this position — and because our engagement with young people often spans extended periods — AYO has a long horizon view of how policy settings play out in practice. We see who enters national pathways, where participation narrows or widens, and how cumulative decisions about access and learning shape the future workforce and audiences for Australian culture.

AYO's purpose is not only to train outstanding musicians, but to inspire, empower and prepare young people for meaningful futures — as artists, educators, contributors to cultural life and leaders within and beyond the arts. We offer this submission from a perspective of stewardship: focused on what has worked under *Revive*, what delivery experience reveals about system strengths and risks, and how effective coordination can support a resilient, inclusive and future ready cultural landscape.

Purpose and Framing

The Australian Youth Orchestra welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of Australia's National Cultural Policy. The introduction of *Revive* marked an important

renewal of national focus on arts and culture, restoring momentum, coherence and confidence in a sector that had experienced sustained uncertainty.

AYO recognises the impact of this policy reset and the role it has played in enabling stronger institutions, clearer partnerships and a more deliberate focus on artistic excellence, access and participation — including for national youth and training organisations with long-term responsibility for workforce development and cultural renewal.

This submission is offered in a spirit of stewardship and collaboration. It draws on national delivery experience to reflect on what has worked well under *Revive*, what has shifted in the cultural ecosystem as a result, and where policy alignment and coordination are most critical to sustaining impact over time.

Rather than advancing proposals for new initiatives, this submission focuses on effectiveness, coherence and system design — particularly where outcomes depend on the interaction between cultural policy, education settings, training pathways and audience development. It aims to support the next phase of the National Cultural Policy by identifying practical opportunities to strengthen how existing intent translates into long-term cultural capability.

The perspectives shared here are grounded in lived experience of delivery at national scale, and in AYO's responsibility to steward talent, partnerships and public value across generations.

2. What has worked well under Revive

From AYO's perspective, *Revive* has functioned less as a collection of initiatives and more as a reset of intent and operating conditions for the cultural sector. The emphasis on strong institutions, centrality of artists, participation across the lifecycle and national cultural capability has had practical effects on how organisations plan, partner and deliver.

2.1 Policy stability has strengthened delivery and partnerships

A defining feature of *Revive* has been the reestablishment of policy stability and multi-year intent. For national organisations with long planning horizons, this stability has been particularly significant.

For AYO this has enabled:

- more deliberate national and international partnerships, aligned with long-term artistic and educational goals

- stronger collaboration across the training and professional ecosystem, including with other Arts8 organisations, major performing arts companies and education partners
- more responsible stewardship of workforce, safeguarding, digital capability and governance obligations that require continuity rather than short-term responses.

This steadiness has supported better decision-making, not just about what AYO delivers, but *how* and *with whom*. In this sense, *Revive* has functioned as enabling infrastructure: creating the conditions in which quality, access and accountability can be balanced.

2.2 Excellence, access and learning have been better aligned

A further strength of *Revive* has been its clear recognition that skills development, learning and participation sit at the centre of a healthy cultural system. The policy frames these not as integral to cultural vitality and artistic renewal.

For organisations working with young artists, this framing matters in practical terms. AYO's experience consistently shows that sustained learning environments are where excellence is formed. Young musicians who have access to high-quality learning, supported by strong teaching, challenge, feedback and peer exchange, are better equipped to contribute artistically, engage audiences and sustain long-term practice.

This alignment has been particularly important for youth and training organisations operating at the intersection of education and professional practice. It reflects AYO's delivery experience and highlights why arts education warrants consideration not only as an input, but as a core element of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

In this sense, *Revive* has helped bring learning, excellence and access into the same conversation, reflecting the reality AYO sees in practice: that cultural excellence is renewed through education and participation.

2.3 The centrality of the artist in a digital and AI-enabled environment

The National Cultural Policy *Revive* placed the centrality of the artist at the core of Australia's cultural framework. AYO supports the continued strengthening of this principle, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving digital and artificial intelligence technologies.

Recent policy settings in Australia have taken important steps to recognise and protect the rights of artists in relation to the use of creative work in AI systems, including the exclusion of Australian creative content from certain training datasets.

These developments position Australia as a leader in acknowledging the value of artistic labour in a digital environment.

From AYO's perspective, maintaining and extending this approach is critical. As new technologies continue to reshape how creative work is produced, distributed and consumed, clear policy settings that protect artists' rights and value will be essential to sustaining a viable and ethical cultural sector.

This is a matter of safeguarding individual creators and ensuring that Australia's cultural capability — including the development of future artists — is supported within a framework that recognises and respects creative ownership.

3. Arts Education as National Cultural Infrastructure

Arts education is foundational to Australia's long-term cultural capability. While often framed as a curriculum issue, AYO's national delivery experience shows that access to high-quality arts learning is a determining factor in the strength, diversity and sustainability of the cultural ecosystem as a whole. Where early access is uneven or fragmented, downstream consequences are felt across training pathways, the professional workforce and audience development over time.

This is not a sector-specific concern. It is a risk to Australia's broader cultural, social and economic capability.

3.1 What AYO sees from system delivery

AYO operates at the intersection of education, training and professional cultural practice, with a longitudinal view of how policy settings translate into capability over time.

From this perspective, declining and uneven access to arts learning directly affects:

- Who enters national pathways — with participation increasingly shaped by geography, school resources and family means rather than talent or potential
- How representative talent pipelines are — narrowing the diversity of voices and communities reflected on Australia's major stages
- Long-term cultural capability — reducing workforce resilience and weakening future audience engagement

These effects are cumulative. By the time young artists are visible to national training organisations or professional companies, many structural factors are already

established. Cultural policy therefore has a legitimate interest in arts education as infrastructure underpinning long-term cultural capability.

3.2 Why cultural policy matters here

Arts education outcomes are delivered primarily through education systems. Cultural policy plays a critical role in connecting these systems to the broader cultural ecosystem and clarifying how outcomes are coordinated across them.

The *Revive* National Cultural Policy acknowledged this relationship by recognising the importance of learning, participation and skills development within a healthy cultural system. The opportunity in the next phase is not to restate these principles, but to strengthen alignment, accountability and coordination between portfolios.

In practice, cultural policy is uniquely placed to:

- articulate the cultural value of arts learning beyond curriculum settings
- define points of connection between education and cultural systems
- clarify responsibility for outcomes that sit across portfolios

AYO's delivery experience, including long-term partnerships such as *Music in Me*, demonstrates that sustained, in-context support can improve access and quality. The broader lesson for policy is not about individual programs, but about the conditions that enable them to succeed.

3.3 Implications for the next National Cultural Policy

Strengthening arts education as cultural infrastructure does not require new pillars or additional funding commitments. It does, however, require greater policy clarity and coordination.

In particular, the next National Cultural Policy could:

- support stronger coordination between the Arts and Education portfolios
- define accountability for key outcomes identified above
- establish clearer connections between education systems and the cultural ecosystem
- emphasise governance and alignment mechanisms over programmatic solutions

This approach moves beyond calls for recognition toward practical resolution. It reflects the reality that arts education cannot be delivered by cultural policy alone — but neither can a culturally capable nation be sustained without it.

While arts education provides a clear example of where cross-portfolio coordination is required, AYO's experience suggests this dynamic is not isolated. Cultural outcomes more broadly are shaped by policy settings across multiple domains of government.

4. Arts and Culture as whole-of-government infrastructure

The next phase of the National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to further embed arts and culture within a whole-of-government framework, recognising their role as a form of social, civic and economic infrastructure.

AYO's delivery experience indicates that cultural outcomes are shaped not only by the settings of the arts portfolio, but by their interaction with broader systems of government. Participation, connection and cultural capability are influenced by policy decisions across education, health, infrastructure, housing and regional development.

From this perspective, arts and cultural activity should not be treated as ancillary to other policy objectives, but as an integrated component of the systems that shape community life and long-term national capability.

4.1 Cultural infrastructure as social infrastructure

Recent policy attention has appropriately recognised the role of cultural infrastructure. AYO's experience suggests that this concept can be strengthened by positioning arts and culture more explicitly within broader definitions of social infrastructure.

In practice, major urban growth and infrastructure planning frameworks provide for schools, healthcare, transport and community services as core components of liveable communities. Arts and cultural infrastructure — including spaces for participation, rehearsal, performance and community engagement — is less consistently embedded at this stage.

Where cultural infrastructure is not incorporated early, provision is often deferred or retrofitted, leading to uneven access and reduced participation across communities.

Recognising arts and culture as part of the baseline social infrastructure of communities would support more integrated planning and stronger long-term outcomes, particularly in areas of rapid population growth.

4.2 Community connection and civic participation

Arts and cultural activity plays a practical role in supporting community connection, shared identity and civic participation. AYO's work with young people across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia demonstrates that sustained engagement in the arts creates environments in which individuals and communities can connect and contribute meaningfully to public life.

Where this activity is limited, these outcomes are diminished. This affects not only cultural participation, but broader social outcomes — including how communities engage diverse populations and support the participation of young people.

From a policy perspective, arts and culture can therefore be understood as mechanisms for participation and connection, operating alongside broader social development settings.

4.3 Health, wellbeing and preventative outcomes

The relationship between sustained participation in the arts and wellbeing outcomes is well established. Engagement in artistic activity supports confidence, identity formation, resilience and social connection, particularly for young people.

While health outcomes are delivered through dedicated systems, cultural participation contributes to the conditions that support preventative wellbeing, particularly by reducing isolation and strengthening connection.

Greater alignment between cultural policy and health frameworks would support a more integrated understanding of how participation in the arts contributes to preventative and population-level outcomes, without requiring new programs.

4.4 Regional development and equitable participation

Arts and cultural infrastructure also sit within a broader regional development context, where policy settings influence the sustainability and vibrancy of local cultural ecosystems.

Participation opportunities contribute to the vitality of regional communities. Where cultural infrastructure is limited, local ecosystems are more difficult to sustain, and opportunities for participation and engagement are reduced.

Embedding arts and culture within regional development frameworks supports more equitable national outcomes, ensuring that cultural participation and community life are not constrained by location.

4.5 Implications for policy coordination

These observations do not point to the need for new programs or additional funding streams. Rather, they highlight the importance of coordination across existing policy settings and portfolios.

In practical terms, the next phase of the National Cultural Policy could strengthen its whole-of-government impact by:

- recognising arts and cultural infrastructure within national social infrastructure frameworks
- supporting alignment between the Arts, Education, Health, Infrastructure, Housing and Regional Development portfolios
- embedding cultural participation and capability within existing planning, reporting and accountability mechanisms

This approach builds on the intent of *Revive* by extending its focus on cultural capability into the broader systems that shape participation, connection and long-term public value across Australian life.

5. What Has Shifted Since Revive

AYO's experience since the introduction of *Revive* aligns with the achievements of the policy more broadly. Where challenges remain, they arise less from intent than from how the system operates in practice across institutions, infrastructure and pathways.

The following observations highlight areas where stronger alignment between policy intent and system behaviour would support more effective outcomes.

5.1 Clearer attention to pathways has exposed misaligned incentives

Revive has brought welcome clarity to the importance of pathways, progression and skills development across the artist lifecycle. From AYO's perspective, this has reinforced learning and development as central to cultural vitality.

At the same time, this clearer focus has highlighted the effect of misaligned incentives within the publicly funded ecosystem. Where funding expectations emphasise training, participation and development outcomes, but do not clearly distinguish between collaboration and replication, organisations may reasonably seek to demonstrate contribution in similar ways.

In practice, this can lead to overlapping activity across publicly funded organisations, particularly in areas relating to youth and early career development. While often well intentioned, such overlap can fragment pathways, increase complexity for participants and reduce the cumulative impact of public investment.

AYO's experience indicates that these dynamics arise less from policy ambition than from how expectations are framed and applied. Where funding settings reinforce complementarity, rather than parallel activity, pathways are clearer, partnerships are stronger and outcomes are more effective over time.

5.2 Audiences respond to quality, while systems often prioritise category

AYO's delivery experience highlights a persistent misalignment between how audiences engage with youth-led and early career work, and how that work is positioned within publicly funded systems.

In operational practice, activity described as "training" or "development" is often treated as secondary in priority. This influences access to venues, scheduling, marketing investment and organisational focus, positioning such work as supplementary rather than central to cultural delivery.

Audience behaviour consistently challenges this assumption. Where early career work is presented with seriousness and intent, and supported by appropriate infrastructure and visibility, audiences respond strongly. Engagement is driven by artistic quality and meaning, rather than career stage.

This disconnect has implications for policy. Where system settings embed secondary prioritisation through language, access norms or operating conventions, they risk undermining the impact of investment in learning and development.

Reframing youth-led excellence as a core expression of cultural life, rather than a preparatory stream, would better align system behaviour with both audience response and policy intent.

5.3 Cultural infrastructure must include systems, access and priority — not only assets

Revive rightly emphasises the importance of cultural infrastructure. AYO's experience suggests that this must extend beyond physical assets to include systems, access and priority mechanisms.

Publicly funded infrastructure delivers public value only where there is clarity around who can access it, with what priority and with what degree of certainty. For national training organisations, access to venues and cultural infrastructure is essential, yet

often governed by informal convention or commercial pressures rather than explicit policy settings.

This can externalise risk onto organisations delivering training and participation outcomes, particularly where access is uncertain or changes late.

This is not a question of favouring individual organisations. It is a question of aligning the use of publicly funded infrastructure with stated policy objectives — including workforce development, participation and long-term cultural capability.

5.4 Publicly funded training ecosystems require coordination

AYO operates within a dense ecosystem of publicly supported training, education and presenting organisations. *Revive* has strengthened recognition of this ecosystem; the next step is to ensure that coordination is explicit rather than assumed.

Without clear coordination, system risks emerge, including:

- duplication of activity
- scheduling conflicts
- competition for participants across publicly funded programs

These dynamics can reduce participation, fragment pathways and weaken the overall effectiveness of public investment.

Greater transparency in planning, clearer expectations around collaboration and a stronger emphasis on complementarity would support a more coherent and efficient system.

5.5 Young artists should be treated as artists now

Policy language and design choices shape the opportunities available to young and early career artists. AYO's experience shows that status matters in practice.

Eligibility rules, partnership norms and assumptions about exclusivity influence whether artists can participate across opportunities and move between training and professional contexts. Where expectations are unclear, barriers increase and pathways narrow.

Treating young artists as artists (rather than conditional participants) supports mobility, fairness and continuity across the system, and strengthens long-term capability by enabling experience and development at appropriate stages.

5.6 Youth voice strengthens quality, relevance and risk management

AYO's work reinforces that embedding youth voice improves both policy design and implementation outcomes.

Organisations working closely with young people have direct insight into emerging pressures, including access, wellbeing and participation barriers. Where these perspectives are integrated into governance and program design, risks are identified earlier and managed more effectively.

This is a practical mechanism for improving quality, strengthening relevance and ensuring that policy intent translates into lived experience.

6. AYO's ongoing role as national cultural infrastructure

AYO's role within Australia's cultural ecosystem is to steward national orchestral training capability over the long term. This function is central to the intent of the National Cultural Policy: ensuring that artistic standards, participation and progression are sustained across generations.

This capability is not built within a single program or stage, but across a distributed system of activity. Early engagement with the arts, including through school-based teacher programs such as AYO's *Music in Me*, supports broad participation and foundational learning.

From there, development pathways continue across school, community, tertiary and pre-professional settings, before a number of young artists engage in advanced national training.

AYO specialises at this advanced end of the system, supporting musicians as they transition into pre-professional and professional environments. Its effectiveness depends on the strength and connection of the system as a whole. This includes both the breadth of early participation and the availability of development opportunities across the middle of the pipeline.

AYO's contribution lies not only in the programs it delivers, but in the coherence it provides across this system — connecting early participation, advanced training, professional environments and audiences over time.

AYO's role can be understood in three interconnected functions.

1) AYO delivers national training and participation at scale

Through sustained engagement with young musicians across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia, AYO embeds learning, artistic excellence and public engagement as mutually reinforcing elements of cultural life. This ensures that access to national pathways is not determined by geography or background.

2) AYO operates as a system connector

By working across education, training, performance and engagement, AYO links parts of the ecosystem that do not naturally align, including schools, tertiary providers, major performing arts organisations and sector peers. This connective function supports complementarity across publicly funded institutions, helping ensure that investment accumulates capability rather than fragmenting it.

This role depends on the strength of the broader cultural ecosystem. For many participants, progression from national training into sustained professional practice occurs through engagement with small and medium-sized organisations, which provide early opportunities for artistic work and career development.

These organisations also contribute to the innovation capacity of the sector, enabling experimentation in artistic practice and audience engagement that complements the work of larger institutions. This diversity of practice is central to the renewal of Australia's cultural life.

Where this part of the ecosystem is not sustained, the impact is felt across the system — narrowing transitions into professional practice, limiting early career opportunities and reducing the diversity of artistic voices.

AYO's experience also highlights the increasingly international nature of early career pathways. Many emerging artists undertake study and professional opportunities overseas at early stages of their development. While this strengthens artistic development and global connectivity, it can represent a point at which continuity of national connection becomes less explicit within current policy settings.

Recognising the international dimensions of artistic pathways would support ongoing connection between Australian artists and the national ecosystem, ensuring that cultural capability developed globally continues to contribute to Australia's cultural life.

3) AYO contributes delivery-based insight to policy development

Through sustained national programs — including long-term initiatives such as *Music in Me* — AYO has visibility of how policy settings operate in practice, particularly at the transition points between education, training and professional contexts.

These insights are grounded in delivery rather than abstraction, and provide a practical lens on where policy intent translates effectively and where alignment can be strengthened.

AYO does not propose new structures or additional layers of activity. Its ongoing contribution is to maintain a strong and coherent national training function, ensuring that existing investment translates into sustained cultural capability.

In this sense, AYO operates as part of Australia's cultural infrastructure: an enduring institution through which public policy intent is realised — supporting excellence, enabling participation and sustaining continuity across the cultural lifecycle.

7. Closing

The National Cultural Policy has provided renewed clarity and stability for Australia's cultural system. The opportunity in the next phase is to embed and align these settings, ensuring that policy intent translates consistently into effective outcomes across education, infrastructure and the broader cultural ecosystem.

AYO's experience highlights that cultural capability is shaped through the interaction of systems over time, not only through individual programs. Strengthening alignment between these systems, particularly at key transition points, will determine how effectively existing investment supports participation, artistic excellence and long-term capacity.

From this perspective, the next phase of the National Cultural Policy could most effectively focus on:

- **Strengthening coordination across portfolios**, particularly between Arts and Education, to reflect the shared responsibility for participation, learning and workforce development
- **Clarifying accountability for key outcomes across the lifecycle**, including access to arts learning, continuity of participation and progression into professional practice

- **Supporting complementarity across publicly funded organisations**, ensuring that investment builds coherent pathways rather than encouraging duplication or fragmentation
- **Embedding arts and cultural infrastructure within broader planning frameworks**, recognising its role in community development, participation and long-term national capability

These are opportunities to build on the strong foundation already established under *Revive*.

AYO offers this submission in a spirit of stewardship. As a national training organisation, we see both the strength of the current policy framework and the opportunity to refine how it operates in practice — ensuring that Australia's cultural system remains coherent, connected and capable over time.

The principles and priorities outlined above are reflected in AYO's national classroom teacher mentoring program, Music in Me. The following attached submission provides further detail on this work and its relevance to the policy settings discussed in this submission.

This submission was developed by the Australian Youth Orchestra. Generative AI tools were used to assist with editing and language refinement. All content has been reviewed and approved by AYO staff and reflects the organisation's views.

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY 2026

Music in Me, Australian Youth Orchestra

Introduction

The National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to strengthen how arts and culture are experienced by all Australians.

For this vision to be realised, every child must have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the arts from the earliest years of schooling. This is where participation begins, where confidence is built, and where the foundations of lifelong engagement are established.

The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), through its *Music in Me* program, contributes to this foundation.

As one of the eight national arts training organisations comprising the Arts8 collective, AYO has spent nearly 80 years developing Australia's professional musicians and creative workforce. Through *Music in Me*, AYO also supports primary school teachers and schools to deliver quality music education, ensuring for more than ten years now that more young Australians can participate, create and connect through music.

AYO is lodging a separate organisational submission addressing AYO's stewardship of national orchestral training capability and broader questions of cultural infrastructure, system coordination and workforce sustainability. This submission, lodged on behalf of the *Music in Me* program, addresses the foundational layer of that work — the implementation of music education in Australia's primary schools through teacher mentoring. The two submissions are designed to be read together, speaking from the apex and the foundations of the same national pipeline.

This submission focuses on how the next National Cultural Policy can support that work in practice.

“Every child should have the opportunity to learn and create music.”
- Richard Gill AO, founder

Music in Me: building capability in schools

Music in Me is AYO's national music education teacher mentoring program. Founded by the late Richard Gill AO and operating since 2015, the program is now in its eleventh year of national delivery.

The program works directly in classrooms, pairing expert mentors with teachers over a sustained period. Together, they plan, teach and reflect — building the teacher's confidence and capability to deliver music independently.

This approach recognises the realities of the current system.

Most primary schools rely on generalist teachers to deliver the arts. At the same time, opportunities for teachers to specialise in music have declined, and specialist roles are not consistently available across schools and regions. Both are needed to build a robust and quality music education strategy.

Music in Me responds to this by supporting both parts of the workforce:

- Generalist teachers, mentored to build their confidence and competence to teach music as part of their everyday practice
- Novice specialist teachers, supported to develop their skills and confidence through mentoring

In both cases, the goal is the same: to build lasting capability within the school, so that music education continues after the mentor's involvement ends.

The model is grounded in evidence. Independent peer-reviewed research by Monash University (Barrett, Zhukov & Welch, 2019; Barrett & Zhukov, 2021, 2024; Zhukov & Barrett, 2025) demonstrates that *Music in Me* mentoring produces substantial growth in teacher confidence to teach music — from an average 3.5% at program entry to 76.5% at completion — and that 90% of principals report satisfaction with the program’s outcomes. Across eleven years, the program has reached 598 schools and 1,131 teachers in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia, in public, Catholic and independent settings.

These outcomes are consistent with a broader research base. International evidence shows that quality, sequential music education improves cognitive function, literacy, numeracy, attendance, wellbeing and social cohesion (Guhn, Emerson & Gouzouasis, 2020).

Furthermore, the Music in Me program specifically aligns with the key national priorities of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034: equity and excellence; wellbeing for learning and engagement; and a strong and sustainable workforce, demonstrated across the body of research to date.

The opportunity

Australia has a strong cultural policy framework in place.

Revive articulates a clear ambition: that all Australians should be able to access and participate in arts and culture, and that artists and creative workers are central to national life.

Across the sector, there is broad agreement that arts education is fundamental to achieving this vision. We support and align with the work of our colleagues advocating for stronger recognition of arts and music education within national policy, including *Music Education: Right from the Start* (Alberts | The Tony Foundation, 2026) and the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE, 2026).

The challenge, however, is not only one of recognition. The challenge is ensuring that policy ambition is realised consistently in classrooms across Australia.

The evidence on this gap is now well established. Year 12 Arts subject enrolments declined nationally by approximately 21% between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof and Saunders, 2026). In primary Initial Teacher Education, average music education training hours have fallen from 17 in 2009 to just eight by 2022 — a more than halving in 13 years (Hocking and Collins, 2023). Recent ACER research in NSW found that 82% of teachers report their initial teacher education in music was inadequate, 55% received fewer than 10 hours of music education during their training, and 69% rank music below eight or more other subjects in their confidence to teach it (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2024). Under *Revive*, the Commonwealth committed $2.6 million over five years to specialist in-school arts education programs (Australian Government, 2023) — modest in scale relative to the broader Commonwealth investment in education priorities such as STEM.

In many schools, particularly in regional, remote and low socio-economic communities, access to quality music education remains uneven. Without addressing this implementation gap, the broader goals of cultural policy — participation, workforce development and audience engagement — will remain difficult to achieve at scale.

A practical approach

Rather than introducing additional policy structures, we propose a focus on implementation.

Arts and music education can be embedded across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy — provided there are effective mechanisms to support delivery within schools.

This includes:

- supporting teachers to deliver music as part of the curriculum
- building capability within schools, not relying solely on external programs
- aligning cultural and education policy settings
- investing in models that are scalable and sustainable

The remainder of this submission shows what this approach looks like across the five pillars, illustrated through Music in Me as a practical example.

Embedding across the five pillars

Arts and music education are not adjuncts to the National Cultural Policy. They are foundational to all five pillars, and are already contributing across each pillar. This can be further developed through specific, identifiable mechanisms.

Pillar	What this looks like in practice	Mechanism
First Nations First	Recognition that First Nations music, language and pedagogy are foundational to Australia's cultural transmission, embedded in resource development and teacher capability under First Nations leadership.	First Nations–led commissioning and resource development; sustained investment in First Nations musicians, composers and educators.
A Place for Every Story	Equitable access to arts and music education regardless of postcode, family income or school sector, reaching the 69% of Australian primary children educated in government schools and prioritising regional, remote and low-ICSEA communities.	Place-based delivery models of mentoring (including Direct, Remote, Multi-year and Whole-School mentoring); expand co-funded Commonwealth–State delivery architectures.
Centrality of the Artist	Recognition of music educators and teaching artists as part of the creative workforce, with pathways for professional musicians to teach through mentoring as well as micro-credentials.	Arts and music pedagogy embedded in teacher accreditation, ITE benchmarks and professional standards established via the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission. Mentoring to support artist workforce working in schools.
Strong Cultural Infrastructure	Cultural infrastructure understood as systems, partnerships and workforce capability, not only physical assets, and including the teacher–mentor workforce that sustains music education in classrooms.	Sustained Commonwealth–State delivery architectures; coordination across the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and the ATLC; co-investment in state Music Education Strategies.
Engaging the Audience	Recognition that audiences, creators and creative workers are formed in childhood, and that classroom music education is the foundation of lifelong cultural participation.	Investment in school performances and foundational music education as audience development, complementing programming and audience-engagement initiatives elsewhere in the system.

Embedding across these pillars depends on coordination between the Arts and Education portfolios — neither can deliver alone. These mechanisms come into effect through delivery, where the most consequential lever is workforce capability — the focus of the section that follows.

Supporting the teacher workforce

Strengthening the teacher workforce is critical to improving access to music education.

We support national advocacy by Alberts, NAAE and the broader sector to:

- strengthen Initial Teacher Education
- expand training opportunities in music across the tertiary sector
- develop clearer pathways for specialist teachers

At the same time, there is an urgent need to support the existing workforce. *Music in Me* teacher mentoring program provides a proven model of professional learning that is:

- practical and classroom-based
- sustained over time
- directly relevant to the teacher's context

A Federal–State partnership for primary teacher development could enable *Music in Me* to be scaled nationally. Flexible pathways for specialist teachers working across schools can be supported through mentoring. Where professional musicians enter the teaching workforce after gaining education credentials, *Music in Me* can support their transition through in-classroom mentoring alongside experienced practitioners.

A new study by Monash University, *Music in Me: Shaping landscapes of Australian music teacher professional learning and development* (Barrett & Zhukov, forthcoming May 2026), will further evidence the program's impact on teacher confidence, wellbeing and career sustainability — themes that speak directly to the BFSA's teacher attraction and retention priorities, and to the AITSL review of national professional standards now underway.

Supporting teachers to teach music is not only an education outcome. It is a workforce strategy.

Equity and access

Ensuring equitable access to music education is a shared priority across the Education and Arts sectors.

By the time young people reach national training organisations, many structural factors are already shaped. *Music in Me's* contribution at the foundational end of this pipeline directly addresses those factors before they become locked in.

Music in Me contributes to this by working with schools in:

- regional and remote communities
- low-ICSEA contexts
- areas where access to specialist teachers is limited

Importantly, the program focuses on whole-class delivery. This ensures that all students benefit — not only those who are already engaged or have access to co-curricular opportunities.

By building capability within the school, this approach creates sustained access over time, rather than short-term program delivery.

Aligning cultural and education policy

To support this work at scale, stronger alignment between cultural and education policy is required.

Cultural infrastructure includes systems, partnerships and workforce capability that sustain cultural delivery, not only physical assets. Recognising this, the next National Cultural Policy can support arts and music education through coordination across existing Commonwealth mechanisms, including:

- a Commonwealth–State Music Education Coordination Group, jointly convened by the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education
- alignment with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, recognising music education as a literacy and numeracy multiplier, supporting equity and access, student wellbeing, and including music teacher professional learning within the Agreement's workforce and professional learning commitments
- recognition of arts and music education in the establishing remit of the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission (ATLC), agreed in principle by Education Ministers in October 2025
- co-investment in state-based Music Education Strategies, including those operating or in development in Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria
- develop the capacity of musicians and artists to support school education outcomes in the arts through targeted professional learning

This approach enables national coordination while recognising the diversity of state education systems. It also positions arts and music education to be embedded in the ATLC's design while its priorities are being set.

Recommendations

To ensure the ambitions of the next National Cultural Policy are realised in practice, we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1 — Embed arts and music education across the five existing pillars.

Give arts and music education explicit, sustained expression within each pillar of the next National Cultural Policy, supported by clearer accountability for outcomes across the Arts and Education portfolios.

Recommendation 2 — Expand the capacity and reach of the Music in Me program.

Provide additional Commonwealth investment to expand *Music in Me*, building on the existing co-funded delivery model to reach significantly more teachers, schools and children — with priority to regional, remote and low-ICSEA communities. This recommendation is offered as a focused operational ask within the broader stewardship contribution AYO makes to the National Cultural Policy review, including through its companion organisational submission.

Recommendation 3 — Establish a Federal–State partnership for primary teacher development in music.

A coordinated partnership would enable national scaling of mentoring, support flexible specialist teacher pathways, and provide structured in-classroom mentoring for professional musicians entering teaching.

Recommendation 4 — Align the next National Cultural Policy with the Commonwealth's education architecture.

Adopt a coordinated approach through existing mechanisms:

- a Commonwealth–State Music Education Coordination Group, jointly convened by the Office for the Arts and the Department of Education
- alignment with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, recognising music education as a literacy and numeracy multiplier and including music teacher professional learning within its workforce commitments
- recognition of arts and music education in the establishing remit of the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission
- co-investment in state-based Music Education Strategies.

Recommendation 5 — Recognise music teacher professional learning as a workforce strategy.

Embed support for the existing music education workforce within the Commonwealth's broader teacher attraction, retention and wellbeing priorities — connecting cultural and education policy at the workforce level.

Recommendation 6 — Invest in scalable, evidence-based delivery models that build lasting capability in schools.

Prioritise approaches that work directly with classroom teachers, focus on whole-class delivery, and sustain access beyond the life of any single program.

Conclusion

The National Cultural Policy provides a strong foundation for Australia's cultural future.

The next step is to ensure that its ambitions are realised in practice.

This requires:

- aligning cultural and education policy
- supporting the teacher workforce
- investing in scalable, evidence-based delivery models that build lasting capability in schools

Music in Me demonstrates how this can be achieved. It is offered as a practical expression of stewardship at the educational foundation of Australia's musical pipeline.

By building capability within schools, it strengthens access, participation and long-term engagement — supporting the goals of all five pillars of the policy, and complementing the broader reform agenda advanced by Alberts, NAAE and the wider arts education sector.

> *Every child should have the opportunity to experience the benefits of music education. With the right support, teachers can make this possible in every classroom, in every school, across Australia.*

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