

Submission on A National Cultural Policy

May 2026

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Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Australian Government's Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts' National Cultural Policy.

Arts and culture are not peripheral to SSI's mission. They are central to it. The work of settlement is not complete when housing is secured and employment is found. It is complete when people can see themselves reflected in the cultural life of the country they now call home, when their stories are told with dignity, and when their creative inheritance is recognised as part of Australia's inheritance. Settlement, in its fullest sense, means being welcomed not only as a resident but as a maker of culture.

This conviction is grounded in SSI's experience of enabling, facilitating and being party to the core role that arts and culture play in the lived experience of its clients and communities. Across SSI's national arts and culture programs, including Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC), SSI Homelands, Creative Compass, and Arts & Culture (NSW and VIC), we have seen consistently that participation in arts and culture accelerates the conditions for genuine belonging. It builds social connections that employment pathways alone do not generate. It creates platforms for self-expression that other services cannot offer. And it generates civic trust across communities, between newcomers and longer-established Australians, and between First Nations peoples and those who have more recently arrived, which is the foundation of a cohesive society.

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), to which Australia is a signatory, affirms that cultural diversity is a "common heritage of humanity" and that cultural activities, goods and services "convey identities, values and meanings" that must not be reduced to their commercial value alone. SSI's experience bears this out. The artists and communities we work with do not engage in cultural practice as recreation. They engage in it as an act of identity and contribution, to Australia's cultural story as much as to their own.

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services connecting individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities, including settlement support, disability inclusion programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways. At the heart of everything we do is a drive for equality, empathy, and celebration of every individual.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas, including Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. In 2024–25, SSI supported over 53,000 people across almost 60 programs and community-based services nationally.

SSI's arts and culture programs sit at the intersection of this broader mission and Australia's cultural life. Through Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC), SSI's self-funded subsidiary and Queensland's leading multicultural arts organisation, as well as SSI Homelands, Creative

Compass, and Arts & Culture (NSW and VIC), SSI supports newly arrived and culturally diverse artists to build sustainable creative careers, access professional pathways, and contribute to the mainstream cultural conversation. These programs consistently reach communities that mainstream arts institutions describe as ‘hard to reach’. In SSI’s experience, those communities are not disengaged. The sector simply has not yet built the infrastructure, trust, or cultural safety to meet them where they are.

This submission outlines the significance of the National Cultural Policy’s five pillars for refugee, migrant, and CALD communities; refers to several case studies and makes recommendations grounded in two decades of direct practice. Best practice cultural policy is adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to the diversity of each nation’s identities, experiences, and expressions.¹ The recommendations that follow are intended to advance those approaches and to make the case that a genuinely national cultural policy must reflect the full breadth of those who make this nation’s culture.

Summary of SSI Recommendations

Arts and culture are the foundation of expression, connection, belonging and social cohesion

Arts and culture are a very distinct means to communicate and share human expression and experience. Research shows that in the Australian context, culturally and linguistically diverse communities identify the arts and culture as important means through which this sense of connection and belonging to Australia is built.² Simultaneously, culturally and linguistically diverse people report Australia’s level of inclusion their communities to participate in Australia’s arts and cultural life, has much room to improve.³ This is the opportunity that the National Cultural Policy must seize.

A nation that unequivocally supports the flourishing of arts and culture in an intentional, holistic way will enable all communities and strata of society to create, engage and experience the arts, will ultimately strengthen social cohesion.⁴ It is through this lens that SSI makes the following recommendations under each Pillar of the National Cultural Policy:

SSI Recommendations	Pillar
1. Fund opportunities for cultural sharing, exchange and co-creation between First Nations, refugees and culturally diverse communities.	Pillar 1
2. Provide dedicated resourcing alongside a requirement that settlement services help start the process of refugees build understanding of First Nation’s people and culture.	Pillar 1
3. Increase funding for organisations that create employment and professional pathways for artists (such as brokerage into festivals/venues, paid placements, professional development and culturally safe networks).	Pillar 3, Pillar 4
4. Expand tailored micro-grants/commissions for newcomer and culturally and linguistically diverse artists and community-led events.	Pillar 3, Pillar 4
5. Make inclusion supports for cultural events and arts spaces eligible line items in funding.	Pillar 2, Pillar 3, Pillar 4
6. Invest in building capability (skills, equipment, production support) for sustainable creative and artistic digital and hybrid works and presentations and develop clear expectations for rights protection and fair remuneration online. This investment and development should occur through collaboration with community and arts organisations including multicultural and settlement organisations and artist representatives.	Pillar 2, Pillar 3, Pillar 4
7. Increase and improve access to tailored financial assistance (e.g., grants, commissions, paid engagements) so newcomer and culturally diverse artists can continue to practice and build sustainable careers. Such assistance should also extend to skills and practice development and exploration in innovations such as in digital/hybrid modalities.	Pillar 2, Pillar 3
8. Ensure crisis and income-support settings do not exclude the most precarious creative workers (including people on temporary visas), so disruptions such as natural disasters and similar emergencies do not force artists out of the sector.	Pillar 3, Pillar 4

9. Create dedicated long-form creative development funding for culturally diverse artists — residency and development funding that gives artists time and resource without requiring an annual deliverable output.	Pillar 3
10. Support “the supporters” by resourcing settlement and multicultural organisations that provide trusted access, navigation and advocacy for artists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.	Pillar 2, Pillar 4
11. Fund the establishment of longer-term place-based partnerships linking institutions, local government and community/settlement organisations on arts and creative initiatives including those by culturally and linguistically diverse people.	Pillar 2, Pillar 4
12. Develop a national audience development strategy for culturally diverse communities, with dedicated funding for organisations with demonstrated capacity to reach audiences that mainstream institutions cannot.	Pillar 5
13. Create dedicated long-form creative development funding for culturally diverse artists — residency and development funding that gives artists time and resource without requiring an annual deliverable output.	Pillar 3
14: Resource community and settlement organisations to play an active role in arts audience development, covering the real costs of this work including staff time, multilingual materials, and culturally safe event facilitation.	Pillar 5
15: Ensure that audience development metrics in funding accountability frameworks reflect actual community reach — not only ticket sales — so that organisations serving communities with low ticket-purchasing capacity are not penalised for the depth of their community engagement.	Pillar 5

Please note SSI’s recommendations align with those of the Multicultural Framework Review:

Recommendation 8:

Creative Australia to undertake a whole-of-government review of investment in community cultural programs.

Recommendation 9:

Creative Australia to lead development of a pilot multi-year seed fund community-driven creative solutions to social challenges.

Recommendation 10:

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the Arts to establish a program for community organisations to apply for funding to embed an arts and cultural worker in their organisation.

Pillar 1 – First Nations First

Newcomers' settlement and cross cultural exchange providers opportunities to support better understanding of First nations people

A strong National Cultural Policy should recognise that enjoyment of and access to culture is a human right, and that cultural rights and leadership must be centred for First Nations peoples. For multicultural communities, this also means ensuring opportunities to learn from, engage with and respect First Nations stories, languages and culture, and supporting First Nations-led partnerships that strengthen inclusion and social cohesion.

Settlement services can help start the process of building cultural understanding between refugees and First Nations people. SSI as a settlement organisation facilitates the start of better understanding the place of First Nations people and culture in Australia. Through its delivery of the Humanitarian Settlement Program, SSI conducts orientation with refugees, supporting their settlement into Australian life. This orientation includes developing an understanding of First Nations people and their role in Australia.

Case Study: Research shows that cultural exchange is an opportunity to build better understanding between First Nations people and refugees

In general, there is little research on how refugees relate to First Nations histories and issues in Australia (or indeed elsewhere). SSI's Foundations for Belonging 2023 research⁵ aimed to address this gap by focusing on First Nation's histories and peoples through First Nations-led yarning opportunities to engage refugee participants in the research with Aboriginal knowledges and practices over three consecutive stages: in-person workshops conducted on Country, utilisation of a mobile phone app, and online focus group discussions. The research found that the endurance of First Nations' peoples and their cultures gave refugees a greater sense of their own cultural safety in the face of more dominant western culture in their new home.

Harnessing this shared bond between refugee and First Nations communities requires sustained and structured action from government, settlement providers, peak bodies, and reconciliation groups to enhance avenues for education, collaboration and reconciliation.⁶ This includes developing more systematic engagement activities across settlement programs for refugees to strengthen their understanding of First Nations peoples particularly at the local level. Cultural activities, events and opportunities to collaborate and co-create should be supported between First Nations people, refugees and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Recommendation 1:

Fund opportunities for cultural sharing, exchange and co-creation between First Nations, refugees and culturally diverse communities.

Recommendation 2:

Provide dedicated resourcing alongside a requirement that settlement services help start the process of refugees build understanding of First Nation's people and culture.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Recognising and supporting diverse forms of expression and participation including from multicultural communities

Cultural policy should recognise and resource diverse cultural expression where it happens—locally and place-based—while ensuring people at risk of exclusion can participate (including through digital and hybrid modes). This is particularly important for culturally diverse communities.

Local culture and gatherings can be sites for participation for the whole community. Festivals, events and neighbourhood creative practice are major “entry points” for participation and should be funded as part of cultural infrastructure, including the real costs of inclusion (language support, access needs, transport, childcare and culturally safe facilitation and spaces).

Case Study: SSI arts programs building connection and social inclusion through culturally grounded practice

In FY25, SSI continued to support creative and professional pathways for newly arrived artists and cultural practitioners through programs including Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC) (QLD), Arts & Culture (NSW and VIC), Creative Compass (NSW), and Holding Space at the Community Refugee Welcome Centre (NSW). These initiatives supported 610 people and provided opportunities for artistic growth and participation in community arts, festivals and cultural events to build connections and enhance social inclusion. A highlight was the 2024 World of Cultures event, celebrating Logan City's diversity, which attracted 350 artists and 3,500+ Queenslanders. The Community Refugee Welcome Centre in NSW ran several initiatives that provided creative platforms for local artists and attracted 1,000+ people, including The Spirit of Welcome festival, art and creative workshops, and teen storytelling workshops.

These programs demonstrate that culturally grounded arts participation, programming that reflects the actual diversity of Australian communities and operates with genuine cultural hospitality, generates audience engagement that mainstream programming cannot replicate. 97% of surveyed BEMAC attendees agreed the event gave them the opportunity to access cultural activities they would not otherwise encounter. 90% agreed it gave them greater respect for cultural diversity.

*SSI's Homelands program provides a further example. In June 2025, SSI Homelands co-presented the world premiere of *The Resonant Heart*, an all-female ensemble of artists from South Sudan, India, Iran, Bosnia, and the Sephardic Jewish diaspora, at the Studio, Sydney Opera House, and the Long Room, Melbourne Immigration Museum. *The Resonant Heart* had spent five years in autonomous creative collaboration developing their debut EP, *The Heart Whispers and Whirls*, performed in seven languages. The co-presentation brought culturally diverse audiences into two of Australia's most significant national cultural venues, many for the first time.*

Recommendation 3:

Increase funding for organisations that create employment and professional pathways for artists (such as brokerage into festivals/venues, paid placements, professional development and culturally safe networks).

Recommendation 4:

Expand tailored micro-grants/commissions for newcomer and culturally and linguistically diverse artists and community-led events.

Recommendation 5:

Make inclusion supports for events and arts spaces eligible line items in funding.

Recommendation 6:

Invest in building capability (skills, equipment, production support) for sustainable creative and artistic digital and hybrid works and presentations and develop clear expectations for rights protection and fair remuneration online. This investment and development should occur through collaboration with community and arts organisations including multicultural and settlement organisations and artist representatives.

Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

Supporting artists as workers and creators

Cultural policy should treat artists as workers: prioritising safe, fair and inclusive conditions; protecting rights online; and ensuring accessible skills pathways so creators can sustain livelihoods and be recognised across the economy.

- Fair pay and safer work: Address structural precarity (freelance/sole trader work, weak networks for newcomers) through fair contracting, paid opportunities and culturally safe supports. While there is precarity generally when it comes to artist and creative practice, this is exacerbated further when natural disasters, emergencies and crisis occur, such as when parts of Australia experience bushfires, floods or during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Support emerging and hybrid practice: Treat online and hybrid delivery as legitimate practice by funding skills, equipment and production capability, alongside outlining clear expectations for rights protection and fair remuneration.
- Skills and practice development: Fund lifelong learning (digital, producing, entrepreneurship). BEMAC's experience delivering A Stage Called Home (2025) and Liminal World (2026) demonstrates that professional creative skills development, when embedded within culturally safe, artist-led programs, produces measurable outcomes for artist sustainability, confidence, and sector participation. Development support must be

recognised as a legitimate investment in the artist as worker, not simply a community engagement activity.

Case study: Community and non government self funded art initiatives require sustained government investment

In the past, SSI's Arts & Culture program delivered creative pathways and community arts initiatives, adjusting professional development workshops and other activities to virtual delivery whenever possible, resulting in engagement of over 20 newcomer artists involved in the program.⁷

SSI's previous Artist Support Initiative during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, matched art lovers with visual artists who had lost work due to COVID-19 impacting generating artwork sales. While these initiatives provided welcome support to artists, their scalability and sustainability required continued investment from government.

Case Study: Project Chameleon — cross-institutional creative development as a model for the sector

In 2025, BEMAC and Metro Arts partnered to support the creative development of Chameleon, a new contemporary ballet with original music composed by Tsoof Baras and choreography by Rani Luther. The work explores the story of a father and son who arrive in a new land carrying the weight of their ancestors and the hope of connection with a new community — a narrative drawn directly from the experience of displacement and integration that defines the lives of many artists BEMAC works with.

The partnership combined Metro Arts' established infrastructure for contemporary performance with BEMAC's deep expertise in cultural safety and its sustained relationships with culturally diverse artists. This enabled Tsoof Baras — as composer — to access mainstream arts infrastructure while developing work on his own terms, without being asked to shape it for external expectations of what 'multicultural art' should look or sound like. The residency model broke down the traditional confinement of diverse artists in culturally specific presentation frames, and demonstrated that ambitious, original work is possible when investment is sustained and conditions are genuinely safe.

This partnership model — a culturally specific organisation working alongside a mainstream arts institution for creative development — is replicable and represents a significant opportunity for the sector. It requires dedicated funding for the relationship-building, cultural safety work, and institutional adaptation that such partnerships depend on.

Recommendation 7:

Increase and improve access to tailored financial assistance (e.g., grants, commissions, paid engagements) so newcomer and culturally diverse artists can continue to practice and build sustainable careers. Such assistance should also extend to skills and practice development and exploration in innovations such as in digital/hybrid modalities.

Recommendation 8:

Ensure crisis and income-support settings do not exclude the most precarious creative workers (including people on temporary visas), so disruptions such as natural disasters and similar emergencies do not force artists out of the sector.

Recommendation 9:

Create dedicated long-form creative development funding for culturally diverse artists — residency and development funding that gives artists time and resource without requiring an annual deliverable output.

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Building resilient, adaptable, responsive and multi-purpose cultural infrastructure systems

While multi-purpose cultural infrastructure includes major institutions, it also requires the local ecosystem that sustains participation through involving community organisations and place-based venues and producers that build relationships with audiences over time, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Resilience depends on sustained investment for long-term partnerships, organisational capability and capacity and crisis-ready systems.

SSI's experience through Arts and Culture programming and BEMAC shows that multicultural artists and audiences often encounter barriers across the full venue experience, not only in programming. These barriers can include communication, welcome, front-of-house practice, technical support, contracting, payment processes and audience engagement. Policy settings should support venues of all sizes to build the capability and confidence to operate in culturally responsive ways.

SSI's arts and cultural impact is inseparable from its broader humanitarian, settlement and community work. It is precisely because SSI works across settlement, inclusion and community development that it is able to build trust, identify emerging artists, support audiences and create meaningful pathways into the arts. Funding settings that restrict eligibility to arts-only organisations risk excluding some of the most effective models for cultural participation and artist development.

Case Study: Multicultural Sports Club – a place-based opportunity to support cultural activities⁸

Sport helps connect communities, and SSI's Multicultural Sports Club at Gould Adams Park in Queensland offers a variety of programs for all ages, including tournaments, fitness and dance classes.

Programs focus on improving social connections, school engagement, and participation. SSI also host community events like International Women's Day and Refugee Week.

Beyond sports, the club promotes arts and recreation to encourage creativity and connection, highlighted by the 2024 Equality Music program. In FY25, 2,443 (1,795 in FY24)

participants from more than 100 cultural backgrounds accessed the club, with over 14,900 (18,250 in FY24) participant touchpoints in the year.

Case Study: Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC) — culturally specific infrastructure as a pathway to the mainstream

Part of SSI's creative community, acclaimed slam poet Huda the Goddess (Huda Fadlelmawla) was named the winner of the Australia for UNHCR — SBS Les Murray Award for Refugee Recognition in April 2025. Huda, who was nominated by SSI, regularly performs at SSI's self-funded subsidiary, the Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre (BEMAC). She is currently the Australian Poetry Slam Champion and two-time Queensland champion, establishing herself as a powerful voice in spoken word poetry. As an artist, Huda's goal is to evoke emotion in her audience, using her words to create powerful connections and foster understanding about refugees.

Huda's trajectory reflects BEMAC's model: artists are developed within a culturally safe presenting environment that provides platforms, audiences, and professional relationships until they are ready for national recognition. They are not simply brought into a diverse programme. BEMAC's 2025 season, *A Stage Called Home*, comprised fourteen original productions presented in partnership with QPAC, Metro Arts, Brisbane Powerhouse, and Queensland Theatre, spanning music, dance, spoken word, visual art, and interdisciplinary performance.

BEMAC's audience impact data demonstrates the value of this infrastructure:

- 90% of surveyed BEMAC attendees agreed the event gave them greater respect for cultural diversity.
- 97% of surveyed BEMAC attendees agreed the event gave them the opportunity to access cultural activities they would not otherwise encounter.

In 2026, BEMAC confirmed its transition to the Thomas Dixon Centre — a significant step reflecting the organisation's growth as a presenting institution and its increasingly prominent position within Queensland's mainstream arts landscape. This transition illustrates the importance of infrastructure funding frameworks that are flexible enough to support multicultural arts organisations at every stage of their development, not only at their earliest formation.

Case Study: SSI Homelands and The Resonant Heart: settlement organisations as flagship cultural partners

In June 2025, SSI Homelands co-presented the world premiere of *The Resonant Heart* at the Studio, Sydney Opera House (Eora/Sydney) and the Long Room, Melbourne Immigration Museum (Naarm/Melbourne). *The Resonant Heart* is an all-female ensemble of multidisciplinary artists — South Sudanese poet Lizzy Kuoth, Indian sitarist and singer Sarita McHarg, Iranian Qanun player Vahideh Eisaei, and the Balkan and Sephardic Jewish music trio Saray Iluminado Femme — who had spent five years in autonomous creative collaboration developing their debut EP, *The Heart Whispers and Whirls*, performed in seven languages.

The premiere was developed in collaboration with Sydney Opera House, the Melbourne Immigration Museum, and Naarm-based label Music in Exile, and included the world premiere screening of a short film directed by Olive Moynihan. The project demonstrates that

settlement and social services organisations can be credible partners for flagship national cultural institutions. Not because of their scale, but because of the depth of their community trust and their sustained relationships with artists whose work would not otherwise reach those venues.

This co-presentation model, SSI bringing artist-led, culturally grounded work to major national venues, is a direct expression of what strong cultural infrastructure looks like when it is genuinely inclusive: not programs designed for diverse audiences, but partnerships that bring culturally diverse artists and communities into the full breadth of Australia's cultural life.

Case Study: Creative Compass⁹

Creative Compass invests in the artistic careers of refugee artists by offering tailored mentorship, skills development and pathways into the Australia's arts industry. It aims to build sustainable creative careers, foster social inclusion through events, and celebrate cultural identity.

More than 200 newly arrived artists have taken part in the program since its inception, with artists from countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Congo, Myanmar, Pakistan, Palestine, Iran and Iraq taking part.

- *95% of Creative Compass artists reported a greater sense of belonging and inclusion within the community.*
- *85% of Creative Compass artists reported increased confidence and social connections.*
- *95% of the Community Refugee Welcome Centre participants reported feeling more connected with the community after the events.*

In 2025, SSI's Creative Compass program has seen participants sell more than \$40,000 worth of artwork in less than 12 months through two unique exhibitions set up on easels in a busy Sydney CBD thoroughfare developed by 20 artists.¹⁰

Recommendation 10:

Support “the supporters” by resourcing settlement and multicultural organisations that provide trusted access, navigation and advocacy for artists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Recommendation 11:

Fund the establishment of longer-term place-based partnerships linking institutions, local government and community/settlement organisations on arts and creative initiatives including those by culturally and linguistically diverse people.

Pillar 5 – Engaging the Audience

Marking connections with audiences at home and abroad

Cultural policy should respond to changing audience behaviours and modes of engagement, including by investing in the organisations and relationships that bring culturally diverse communities into arts participation. For newly arrived and CALD communities, the barriers to arts engagement go well beyond ticket price. They include unfamiliarity with venue norms, absence of representation in programming, language barriers, and the accumulated experience of cultural spaces that do not reflect or welcome diverse communities. Addressing these barriers requires sustained investment in community trust, not marketing.

Local gatherings and community-rooted programs as audience development

SSI's arts programs demonstrate that the most effective pathway to arts participation for newly arrived communities is through organisations they already trust. The 2024 World of Cultures event at Logan City attracted 3,500+ Queenslanders because it was rooted in existing community relationships, not institutional outreach. BEMAC's audience data reflects the same principle: 97% of attendees accessed cultural activities they would not otherwise encounter, and culturally grounded programming, in environments that feel safe and welcoming, generates participation that no mainstream marketing strategy can replicate.

Flagship venues and community partners

SSI Homelands' co-presentation of *The Resonant Heart* at Sydney Opera House and the Melbourne Immigration Museum demonstrates what is possible when flagship venues partner with settlement organisations. The audiences who attended did so because SSI's long-term relationships with their communities made attending feel possible. Many entered these national venues for the first time. This is audience development as a structural act of inclusion, not a marketing exercise.

Digital participation and discoverability

Younger culturally diverse Australians are engaging with culture through digital platforms, often in multiple languages and across international cultural communities, in forms the sector has not yet developed frameworks to recognise or support. The next National Cultural Policy should develop digital participation frameworks attentive to culturally diverse practice, including multilingual content, cross-cultural collaboration, and the distinctive ways younger multicultural Australians create and discover cultural work.

Recommendation 12:

Develop a national audience development strategy for culturally diverse communities, with dedicated funding for organisations with demonstrated capacity to reach audiences that mainstream institutions cannot.

Recommendation 13:

Create a dedicated long-form creative development funding for cultural culturally diverse artists – residency and development funding that gives artists time and resource without requiring an annual deliverable output.

Recommendation 14:

Resource community and settlement organisations to play an active role in arts audience development, covering the real costs of this work including staff time, multilingual materials, and culturally safe event facilitation.

Recommendation 15:

Ensure that audience development metrics in funding accountability frameworks reflect actual community reach — not only ticket sales — so that organisations serving communities with low ticket-purchasing capacity are not penalised for the depth of their community engagement.

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