



THE
CHILDERS
GROUP

AN
INDEPENDENT
ARTS FORUM

17 July 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

via email: legcon.sen@aph.gov.au

**Senate Inquiry investigating the impact of the
2014-2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts**

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to prepare a submission to the Senate Inquiry and to comment on the impact of recent Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts, and the establishment of a new National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) funded by the transfer of \$104m from the Australia Council for the Arts.

I am writing on behalf of the Childers Group, an independent arts advocacy body for the ACT region comprising experienced and impartial representatives: music, dance, performing arts, literature, community cultural development, digital art forms, and the visual arts. The Childers Group is committed to the long-term viability and vitality of the arts. A key part of our role is advocating support for the arts to governments at all levels, and to engage with the private sector, educators, the media and the broader community about the value of the arts and their role in the cultural sector. The Childers Group is an active member of Arts Peak, the federation of national peak arts organisations that promotes research, policy and industry development, communication and advocacy. More information about the Childers can be found at www.childersgroup.com.au

In relation to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, this submission will focus on the 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts and the suitability and appropriateness of the establishment of a National Program for Excellence in the Arts, to be administered by the Ministry for the Arts.

In order to provide context for our concerns about the establishment of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts -NPEA, we begin by making the following key points about arts funding in general:

- the arts are an integral part of any society – this view is shared by 85% of Australians¹
- the arts are about great creative human expression, but they also enable better health and social inclusion outcomes
- Australia’s arts sector contributes \$4.2 billion towards Australia’s GDP²
- a visible, viable, and dynamic arts ecology is essential to a modern democracy such as Australia, as is freedom of arts expression
- public sector funding of the arts – at all levels of government – is **essential** if the sector is to continue to survive and grow and engage audiences
- many areas of the arts are struggling:
 - studies consistently reveal that professional artists and arts workers receive incomes that are significantly lower than the national average
 - the majority of practising professional artists can only survive by working 2 or more jobs, meaning their arts practice becomes a low priority
 - more often than not small to medium arts organisations operate on small teams who are required to work long hours delivering complex programs
 - while the majority of arts organisations and artists find it tough going, those in regional Australia find it especially so due to limited infrastructure and, in some cases, a lack of public-sector awareness of the activity that happens outside the major metropolitan areas.

In relation to the NPEA, we note that the Australian Government released the draft Guidelines. There are some positive aspects to the draft Guidelines relating to **regional arts development**: *It will support projects enabling regional and remote audiences, to have new opportunities for access to a wide range of art forms. It is from this stream that the Australian Government will directly fund appropriate major initiatives.* We commend this commitment to encouraging and promoting access to and engagement in the arts in regional Australia, as too often it is underrepresented in the allocation of funds from arts budgets.

However, also relating to regional arts development, the Childers Group cautions against the strict application of the following provision when considering regional projects as it is not always possible, nor desirable, to aim for national outcomes when undertaking a regionally specific program: *applicants should keep in mind that the program seeks to support projects that deliver national outcomes and deliver a diverse range of quality projects in each of the program streams.*

The Childers Group expresses concern about the following aspects of the Guidelines, and in the way the NPEA model has been developed and proposed:

¹ *Arts Nation: An Overview of Australian Arts* (March 2015) <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/the-arts-matter-to-australia-and-the-data-shows-it/>

² Refer previous link

1. We are concerned about the undermining of the Australia Council

The draft Guidelines state that the overarching goal of the NPEA is *to provide a responsive, national approach to supporting participation in and access to Australia's high quality, diverse and vital arts and cultural sector*. There is little doubt that for the majority of the arts industry this new initiative appears to duplicate some functions of the Australia Council and has created a good deal of confusion and anxiety within the sector. It appears the Australia Council had little or no warning of this significant change to funding arrangements; many of its clients feel they are now in limbo regarding projects they understood they would be delivering.

2. We are concerned about the NPEA putting constraints on innovation

The draft Guidelines state that one of the objectives of the NPEA will be to *strengthen Australia's reputation as a sophisticated and artistic nation with a confident, outward-focused arts sector*. The Childers Group is concerned that a reference to 'outward-focussed' is code for only supporting arts organisations and programs/projects that engage big audiences. Audience engagement and development is critical for the development of the sector, but so is innovation and risk-taking – the popular works of tomorrow often come from artists who are experimenting now.

3. We are concerned about a perceived watering down of peer assessment

The peer assessment aspect of the draft Guidelines state: *The Ministry for the Arts will maintain a Register of Independent Assessors comprising sector and community representatives. The Ministry will advertise for expressions of interest and may also identify suitable persons to be invited to become assessors. Assessors will determine whether your application meets the criteria to a high, medium or low degree.*

While we recognise there will be Ministerial peer assessors engaged to assess applications, there is concern within the sector that the result may not be an independent and impartial process. We would like to see indication of how peer assessors will be selected and their Terms of Reference, and clarification about the role of Ministerial staff on the assessment panels.

4. We are concerned about possible political interference in funding decisions

It is understandable that the Australian arts sector is concerned about the issue of freedom of artistic expression, which is a cornerstone principal for the arts sector of a modern and mature democracy. Regarding the NPEA, will artists who may hold a contrary political view to the government be denied funding? This could have serious implications for artists, all of whom have enjoyed the right to explore truth and societal attitudes at any given point in time; this in turn has serious implications for audiences, who may expect to see a robust exploration of contemporary issues. Will the NPEA have to observe political directives relating to applications?

5. We are concerned about sector instability

The NPEA draft Guidelines state it will not fund *projects by individuals*. We are now witnessing many of the smaller arts organisations and independent artists doubting their capacity to have a future in the arts. Many have invested years developing their craft including tertiary qualifications and a preparedness to live on a modest annual income. You will be aware of the disquiet being expressed by those who fear their work is unlikely to be considered under these new guidelines. Will The Australia Council still be an option for them and how will the Council manage its funding given the significant erosion of their funds? How will the Council manage to service their existing clients, let alone foster and nurture new talent?

6. We are concerned about the apparent rush in developing the NPEA

As a proposal the NPEA appears to be rushed and while it is productive that the draft Guidelines have been made available for sector comment, we are concerned that the program may be implemented before all necessary considerations are made and procedural safeguards are put in place – for the sector *and* the government. The Childers Group **recommends** not implementing the program until all issues are sufficiently dealt with and the guidelines and procedures are suitably developed.

We began this submission by stating the unmistakable benefits of the Australian arts sector, but also the undeniable challenges in being an artist and arts worker. We wish we could say otherwise, but it is likely that 2014-2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts will make it even tougher for the Australian arts sector.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment, and we ask to be invited to speak at the Senate Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

[signed]

Professor David Williams AM
Childers Group Spokesperson

www.childersgroup.com.au
childersgroup@gmail.com

Contacts:

David Williams – 6125 1460 or 0448 109 479
Evol McLeod – 0406 378 889