

Dear Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs,

The National Writers Centre Network is writing to express our concern about the decisions made about Federal arts funding in the 2015 Budget.

The National Writers Centre Network is Australia's largest network of writers. The network supports and connects writers in all the States and Territories of Australia. Together, we represent more than 10,000 members and a much broader constituency of sector practitioners, including publishers, bookshops and writers festivals.

On behalf of our members, participants and audiences, we seek a reversal of the cuts to the Australia Council and an assurance that federal arts funding will continue to be administered through an accountable, arms-length, peer-reviewed process.

Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the arts

The ecology of the arts and cultural sectors is diverse and varied. The shift of \$104.8 million from the Australia Council to the new National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) will have significant implications for Australian readers, writers and literary organisations, as well as for the broader arts sector. It will not only have an impact on our organisations, but on our literary- and arts-sector colleagues and our constituency of individual writers, editors, publishers and readers.

Another \$5.2 million of cuts will be redirected from the Australia Council to Creative Partnerships Australia (CPA) to foster private sector support for the arts. While writers and literary organisations may benefit from CPA's match-funding programs, the initiative favours organisations with the resources and contacts to seek and obtain philanthropic support.

That these programs are being supported through a transfer of funds from the Australia Council rather than through additional funding will inevitably place increased pressure on the small-to-medium arts sector generally and disadvantage the writing sector specifically.

A further \$7.2 million in 'efficiency savings' will be cut from the Australia Council over the next four years. The announcements come just months after the newly streamlined organisation implemented a restructure and revised its funding programs, and a year after an initial \$28.2 million was cut as part of Budget 2014.

Senator Brandis has expressed concerns regarding Australia Council processes and funding decisions and yet, despite significant government investment in an extensive review process, he has allowed no time for the organisation to demonstrate the value of the improvements achieved from that review.

The cuts also follow on from last year's announcement that \$6 million would be taken from the Australia Council budget to fund a new Book Council of Australia. Not much has been heard about the initiative since then, however, and the National Writers Centre Network has yet to be involved in the scoping process. There is significant concern across the sector that the Books Council will also redirect funding away from the sector.

"The arts sector is already under enormous pressure from last year's funding cuts," Anne Dunn reported from the recent 'Our Future in Our Hands' forum in Sydney. "People are clearly saying that Minister Brandis needs to bring new money to the table for his new program. He needs to

grow the investment rather than sacrifice the small-to-medium and independent artists, who are critical parts of the sector ecology.”

The Network believes that the proposed changes to Federal arts funding threaten the future quality and viability of Australia’s vibrant arts sector. What should have been a period of stability and strategic growth now risks destabilisation, with the cuts putting extraordinary pressure on artists, funding agencies and philanthropists across the country.

Suitability and appropriateness of the establishment of a National Program for Excellence in the Arts

We support the Australia Council as an independent arms-length statutory body free from political influence.

In contrast to the arms-length, peer-reviewed funding model of the Australia Council, the NPEA will be administered by Senator Brandis’ Ministry for the Arts. The Australia Council has provided a mechanism for independent arts funding for more than 40 years, with grants being fully accountable and applicants being assessed by qualified industry peers. This rigorous process has ensured decisions are made by experts in each art form and are independent of political and other potential pressures.

Selection procedures put in place by the Australia Council have ensured accountability and transparency in the use of public funds. All funding decisions, as well as selection panel reports and membership, have been made publicly available once the process has been completed. By comparison, the NPEA’s draft guidelines state that not all recipients of the new funding will be announced, significantly reducing the accountability and transparency of the process.

With no reduction to funding to the 28 major performing arts organisations, it is the small-to-medium arts sector and independent writers and artists who will bear the brunt of these changes.

The literature sector is likely to be hardest hit by the proposed changes. The Literature Section of the Australia Council had one of the smallest pools of available funding, so it’s easy to see why writers and literary organisations are nervous about what will happen next – particularly as literature is not listed as an eligible art form within the draft NPEA guidelines.

In response to the budget cuts, the Australia Council has suspended the six-year funding program and cancelled its June grant round. We are already seeing the impact of these changes on organisations in terms of their staffing and future programs, in addition to their frustration over the thousands of hours of work that have been wasted.

Initiatives such as ArtStart, the Creative Communities Partnerships Initiative, Artist Residencies and Artists with Disability funding programs will not be offered in the future. The loss of these unique capacity-building, training, development and research initiatives could see us risk the next generations of cultural workers and Australia’s reputation for cultural ambition and excellence.

The remaining Australia Council cuts will have to be found from funding previously allocated for small-to-medium organisations, and independent writers and artists. But the NPEA’s draft guidelines state that it will not fund individuals, resulting in less funding and fewer opportunities for independent practitioners. The new program also reduces opportunities for multi-year and long-term funding that allows organisations to engage in effective and strategic planning.

Protection of freedom of artistic expression and prevention of political influence

We are extremely concerned about issues of accountability and whether the new fund will be administered independent of political intervention; about equity and diversity in terms of access to funding; and the potential impact on freedom of expression.

We also have concerns about the lack of industry consultation in establishing the NPEA. In a Senate Estimates hearing on 27 May, Senator Brandis confirmed that he had not consulted with the arts community before announcing plans for the new agency. We believe that arts funding arrangements should be decided on within the context of evidence-based policy, devised through broad and thorough consultation and research.

Access to a diversity of quality arts and cultural experiences

We assert the great social and public value of the arts which influences and engages people across all layers of society.

The proposed disruption to the current funding model will have a profound and long-lasting effect on the arts as an integrated and inter-connected culturally diverse industry. It will further preference those organisations that have the resources and contacts to seek and obtain philanthropic support through the diversion of funds to Creative Partnerships Australia.

And it will result in significantly less funding and fewer opportunities for independent artists and small-to-medium arts organisations, resulting in increased competition, lack of diversity, downsizing, job losses and reduction in Australia's creative industries (and their subsequent contribution to our cultural identity, social integration and economy).

Funding criteria and implementation processes to be applied to the program

A delegation of arts leaders met in Canberra in June to reject the establishment of the National Program for Excellence in the Arts and its narrow concept of 'excellence'.

Within an arts context, it is important to maintain a broad definition of the term 'excellence', one that can be measured in a variety of different ways - from quality to reach, experimentation, cultural relevance or impact - not just on organisational profile or scale.

A focus on funding excellence at the expense of development risks not having a next generation of writers, artists and arts managers to create excellent work. As Ben Neutze wrote for 'Daily Review', artists and administrators warned that last year's cuts would "hurt the artists and smaller companies who can afford it least, and are a major source of innovation and creative energy."

Implications of any duplication of administration and resourcing

The introduction of the NPEA will directly result in arts funding infrastructure being unnecessarily duplicated, causing resources to be diverted away from the sector.

The establishment of a second arts funding body would not only duplicate functions already exercised by the Australia Council, but also increase the workload for applicants as arts organisations would be required to submit similar or identical applications to both bodies, effectively doubling assessment workload and costs.

Setting up a new grants infrastructure which is likely to duplicate the Australia Council's, but without the benefit of its industry expertise or the buffer of arms-length decision-making, represents a significant waste of public funds. Equally concerning is the step it takes towards a new culture of legitimised political interference in the arts.

We are also concerned that the cuts will cause irreparable damage to the operations and impact of the Australia Council itself, should the organisation have to make further efficiency savings. The Australia Council has just completed a major restructure, responded to \$28.2 million of cuts as part of Budget 2014, and redirected \$6 million to fund the new Book Council, the details of which are yet to be publically released.

Through the duplication of resources and channelling of funds away from the sector, the introduction of the NPEA will have a significant and long-lasting impact on Australia's artists and arts organisations. Risking this delicate arts ecology simply doesn't make cultural, artistic or economic sense.

With best regards,

The National Writers Centre Network

(in alphabetical order)

ACT Writers Centre
NSW Writers Centre
NT Writers Centre
Queensland Writers Centre
SA Writers Centre
Tasmanian Writers Centre
Writers Victoria
Writing WA