



Queensland Alliance for Mental Health

National Cultural Policy

Submission

March 2023

Who is QAMH?

The Queensland Alliance for Mental Health (QAMH) is the peak body for the Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Sector in Queensland. We represent more than 100 organisations and stakeholders involved in the delivery of community mental health and wellbeing services across the state. Our role is to reform, promote and drive community mental health and wellbeing service delivery for all Queenslanders, through our influence and collaboration with our members and strategic partners. At a national level, we have a formal collaboration with Community Mental Health Australia and provide input and advice to the work of Mental Health Australia and the National Mental Health Commission where appropriate. Locally, we work alongside our members, government, the Queensland Mental Health Commission and other stakeholders to add value to the sector and act as a strong advocate on issues that impact their operations in Queensland communities.

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Background

It almost goes without saying that we are living in unprecedented times: the profound disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disasters, international conflict and the cost-of-living crisis have created a “perfect storm” of factors that make mental health and wellbeing one of the greatest – and most costly – public policy challenges of our time.¹ It is a challenge that is only expected to continue as we encounter the long-term impacts of increasing extreme weather events and social and economic disruptions. It also demands that policy makers make a bold and concerted whole-of-government effort to address using innovative evidence-based approaches.

QAMH welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications (the Committee) on the new National Cultural Policy, *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place* that sets the priorities for Australia’s arts, entertainment and cultural sectors over the next five years. We believe that the timing of this policy is critical as we scramble to navigate this challenging policy landscape and the worst effects of the ballooning mental health crisis for individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole.

We also believe that with every challenge comes the opportunity for transformation.

The current issues have shifted the focus onto the pivotal role mental health plays in creating a thriving community. Where it was once the poor cousin of physical health, mental health has been “reconceptualized as a key contributor to the mental wealth of nations, encouraging an asset-based approach that pushes governments to focus on creating environments where people can flourish.”²

The Arts Sector has a promising role to play in creating these environments. Both here in Australia and internationally, there is a large and rapidly growing body of evidence which demonstrates a strong positive impact of the arts on both mental and physical health, and consequently wellbeing as a whole. The evidence is difficult to ignore.

Across the board, studies show that involvement with arts interventions:

- directly help people experiencing mental illness; and

¹ In 2018-19, the Productivity Commission estimated the annual cost to the economy of mental ill-health and suicide in Australia to be up to \$70 billion, a figure that is expected to sharply rise as the number of individuals experiencing high levels of psychological distress has increased dramatically post-pandemic. McKell Institute. (2022). *Under Pressure: Australia’s Mental Health Emergency*. [McKellMentalHealthEmergency.pdf](https://mckellinstitute.org.au/McKellMentalHealthEmergency.pdf) (mckellinstitute.org.au)

² World Economic Forum. (2022). *Future Focus 2025: Pathways for Progress from the Network of Global Future Councils 2020-2022 Insight Report*. [WEF Future Focus 2025.pdf](https://www.weforum.org/future-focus-2025.pdf) ([weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org))

- provide broader benefits impacting community mental wellbeing including improving social determinants of health (e.g. social cohesion and social inequalities and inequities), encouraging health promoting behaviours, preventing ill-health, reducing the impact of trauma and reducing stigma.³

The potential cost savings of arts interventions are also significant. The literature suggests that Arts-Health initiatives are not only effective, but that they also hold economic benefits that may be equal to or greater than the cost-effectiveness of possible health interventions.⁴ And it's not just specific "arts for mental health" programs that are beneficial. Research shows that simply taking part in a creative endeavour can help to reduce people's feelings of anxiety or depression and that people need at least two hours per week of arts engagement for good mental wellbeing.⁵

QAMH has long been calling for a radical shift away from simply managing illness to **actively supporting wellbeing** through a contemporary, whole of community approach. Our strategic vision for the future is laid out in our landmark report [Wellbeing First](#) and is a vision that would have life changing benefits for individuals, for the sector and for the nation as a whole:

- for the individual, this approach will build social and economic participation;
- for clinical mental health services it will alleviate many of the current demand pressures and increase community resilience to life challenges; and
- for the nation, it will foster mental wealth.⁶

The Arts Sector is uniquely poised to assist in progressing the vision of an Australia that places mental wealth and a focus on community wellbeing front and center of *all* policy decisions, and - like the Prime Minister – QAMH believe that the arts have a vital role to play in "developing national identity, social unity and economic success." We suggest that a huge opportunity exists to boldly articulate the value of the Arts Sector in creating a Wellbeing Economy to the wider community and position it

³ Fancourt D, Finn S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review [Internet]*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.

⁴ Fancourt D, Finn S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review [Internet]*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.

⁵ Cited in Australia Council of the Arts. (2022). *Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis*, p10 [Connected-Lives-Creative-solutions-to-the-mental-health-crisis-Web-version.pdf](#)

⁶ Mental wealth is defined as the collective cognitive and emotional resources of citizens. It includes people's mental capital, their mental health and wellbeing which underpins the ability to work productively, creatively and build and maintain strong relationships with others. It is a key benefit of a [Wellbeing First](#) approach that imagines a future state where everyone has access to locally designed wellbeing supports and where the nation's growth is measured not just in economic terms but also in its mental wellbeing.

at the leading edge of cross-sectoral reform and partnerships. The Australia Council for the Arts has also recently outlined ways in which government can positively address the mental health crisis with the tools provided by arts, culture and creativity, recognising that Arts and creativity have a powerful role to play due to their ability to extend beyond traditional health services to address the social determinants of health. We agree with the Australia Council's conclusion that *the only question now is how we best support this through public policy.*⁷

Our specific recommendations for the National Cultural Policy are outlined below.

⁷ Australia Council of the Arts. (2022). *Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis*, p10
[Connected-Lives-Creative-solutions-to-the-mental-health-crisis-Web-version.pdf](#)

Include Wellbeing as a Central Tenet

QAMH strongly believes that a key opportunity exists to place wellbeing at the heart of the National Cultural Policy and send a powerful message regarding the value of the Arts sector in creating a healthy, thriving community for all Australians. This could be achieved by expanding the goal of the new National Cultural Policy to include wellbeing as a key outcome. For example:

A place for every story and a story for every place is essential to create an Australia that is, ultimately, a place for wellbeing.

The National Cultural Policy as it stands is conspicuously underwhelming in its recognition of the value of Arts-Health initiatives and the vast opportunities that integration of wellbeing as a core principle of the policy present, both for the economic revival of the Arts Sector and improving the mental wealth of the wider community. This is especially important now in the climate of post-pandemic recovery and the skyrocketing economic, individual and community costs associated with the current mental health crisis.

Ideally, QAMH would like to see wellbeing incorporated as a key pillar of the National Cultural Policy along with substantial investment to develop and support it, and we believe that the current policy environment supports this.

Acknowledge the COVID-19 Context and Opportunities

The new National Cultural Policy needs to acknowledge that - while it builds on the work of its predecessors – it is being delivered in unprecedented times. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the Arts Sector as well as the wider community. Our members who work at the interface of mental health and the arts tell us that it's not just a case of "business as usual" for a sector still reeling from the disruptive effects of the pandemic. We know that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on the Arts Sector, both economically with many arts professionals transitioning out of the sector, and psychologically as demonstrated by an increase in psychological distress among some cohorts of the sector. Research by Swinburne University showed that suicide attempts among Australia's live performers rose significantly over the last two years, with rates of depression and anxiety double that of the general population.⁸ The 2022 Swinburne study found that more than half of the 1,304 respondents - Australians working in live performance and music - had

⁸ The Guardian. (2022). *Suicide attempts among Australia's live performers rose over last two years, survey reveals*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/may/24/suicide-attempts-among-australias-live-performers-rose-over-last-two-years-survey-reveals>

experienced suicidal thoughts, a rate which is over four-and-a-half times the proportion of the general population. Among those respondents, more than one in 10 had acted on them.

QAMH believe that the National Cultural Policy needs to recognise these impacts by placing a greater emphasis on supporting the Arts Sector with its psychological and economic recovery and assisting arts professionals to feel secure to reenter the sector. We also believe that there is a tremendous opportunity to transform and articulate a long-term vision for the sector, with wellbeing at its heart, a greater focus on Arts-Health initiatives and that supports moves towards a social prescribing scheme for Australia which will assist to provide new economic development opportunities and kickstart the revival of the Arts Sector.

Scale Up Successful Arts-Health Projects

The new National Cultural Policy suggests that the government will commit to the following action:

“Provide pilot funding of \$4.2 million to support access to art and music therapy programs, and generate valuable data on the broader community impacts of, and demand for, these services.”

However, QAMH believe it’s time to move from calls for more evidence and endless “pilot” programs to *commitment and real action* to roll out large scale evidence-based Arts-Health programs.

We have all the evidence we need to know that arts interventions for mental health and wellbeing work. QAMH can point to thousands of case studies and research reports from the international literature⁹ as well as a large number of home-grown studies which overwhelmingly prove the positive link between arts and health. What’s more, we know that the potential cost savings are significant.¹⁰

⁹ Fancourt and Finn (2019) collated the results of 3,700+ studies investigating the role of the arts in improving health and well-being and found a strong positive impact of the arts on both mental and physical health. To date – is the most comprehensive survey of its kind. Remarkably, some studies showed that arts interventions may be as effective or even more effective than widely accepted approaches such as medication, non-arts social interventions or other health interventions such as exercise. Fancourt D, Finn S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review [Internet]*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.

¹⁰ The same study by Fancourt and Finn (2019) found that not only are arts interventions effective, but they also hold economic benefits that may be equal to or greater than the cost-effectiveness of possible health interventions. This is because arts interventions were often found to be multi-faceted, offering several health-promoting factors and reducing the need for other interventions, for example by supporting physical activity with components that also support mental health. They were also found to be an effective route to engaging minority or hard-to-reach groups, who can have higher risks of poor health and for whom health-care costs may otherwise be higher, due to complexity.

What is missing from the evidence is *examples of scaled-up programs and commitment to act on what we already know*. Australia has a key opportunity to play a leading role in this regard.

In Queensland alone, the following programs have been proven to have positive impacts on mental health and wellbeing:

- [Upbeat Arts](#) fosters social connectedness and overall wellbeing by delivering arts and cultural programs including creative writing, song writing and choirs. Educators work together with marginalised communities to build upon the capabilities of participants, encouraging them to take their own personal creative journeys, connect with the community and meet new people. This provides an opportunity to nurture new creative skills while breaking the cycle of social exclusion. A 2016 evaluation¹¹ of the Upbeat Arts School of Hard Knocks Program which engaged participants living primarily with diagnosed mental health conditions in choir and creative writing activities found that just under a half of participants experienced substantial improvements in mental health and satisfaction with life, on validated symptom measures, their own ratings, and in qualitative interviews. This is a remarkable result considering that most were diagnosed with chronic mental health conditions that may have improved but were not resolved. Interestingly, a general population control group in the same study comprising 21.4% of people living with a mental health condition found that participants rated a significantly higher increase in positive emotions that lasted throughout the day because of involvement in choir activities compared to the test group. This indicates that arts can have a positive effect on wellbeing for all population groups and is the type of wellbeing indicator that QAMH would like to see utilised more across all sectors.
- PRIDE art therapy program is a program being trialled by Open Doors Youth Service in which young people who identify as lesbian, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, sistergirl and/or brotherboy (LGBTIQ+SB) are given the opportunity to express themselves in new and different ways through art. The trial, developed in 2017 and funded by a Commission grant, continues as one of the most successful programs run out of Open Doors Youth Service. It has reached more than 3640 young people between the ages of 12 and 24, and encourages self-expression and self-care in healthy, safe ways by connecting to community and culture through artistic activities and exercises. Participant feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 60 per cent identifying a significant reduction in anxiety and 100 per cent

¹¹ Dingle, G. et al. (2016). *School of Hard Knocks QLD: Final Evaluation Report*. [School of Hard Knocks QLD Final Evaluation Report August 2016.pdf](#)

reporting overall improvement to wellbeing. Importantly, 94 per cent reported feeling a greater connection to the group and the LGBTIQ+SB community.¹²

- The ArtBeat music and arts festival was designed to celebrate the creative strengths of people living with a mental illness. Developed by Gold Coast Health in partnership with local non-government organisations, artists and musicians who identify as having a lived experience of mental illness are invited to either submit art to be displayed in the exhibition or perform as part of the music festival. The project was evaluated using qualitative inquiry into peoples' experiences at ArtBeat from 2014-2017 to identify the outcomes. Results revealed three main themes, that ArtBeat:
 - Provides social inclusion and connectedness
 - Offers opportunity to support people living with a mental illness
 - Creates a positive atmosphere of celebration in raising awareness about mental health.

Overall, ArtBeat provided participants with increased motivation, increased engagement with the service, and improvements in their self-esteem and sense of identity. For staff, it allowed for further education around mental health and gave opportunities to show their support for consumers living with a mental illness. For the community it provided information about the different services available in maintaining good mental health, empowering people to start conversations and seek help when needed.

QAMH believe that there is no better time than now – in the current climate of rising rates of mental distress across our population - to make a bold, evidence-based policy commitment to roll out large scale Arts-Health initiatives which can improve the wellbeing of communities.

Include Social Prescription as a Key Policy Focus

Social prescribing is an innovative practice that seeks to improve overall wellbeing in non-medical ways in conjunction with healthcare workers.¹³ It finds new ways to address mental health, and illness, at a community level, and has the potential to reduce the burden on the health care system and reduce overall costs of medical intervention. Social prescribing is gathering significant interest as an evidence-based, affordable, non-clinical adjuvant to more conventional treatments such as

¹² Queensland Mental Health Commission. (2019). *Art as Therapy*. <https://www.qmhc.qld.gov.au/media-events/news/art-as-therapy>

¹³ Australia Council of the Arts. (2022). *Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis*, p13 [Connected-Lives-Creative-solutions-to-the-mental-health-crisis-Web-version.pdf](#)

prescription medications and referrals to psychologists. It is a practice that we know GPs are interested in, with The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners noting that many GPs are already incorporating a form of social prescribing into their day-to-day practice and now calling for it to be officially included in the Federal Government's 10-Year Primary Health Care Plan.

While QAMH welcomes these broad shifts, we believe that a key opportunity exists to embed in communities a general model of social prescription in which individuals seeking support for their mental health work with a link worker/community navigator to co-create their social prescription. A link worker would ease pressure on GPs and create a suitable point for GPs to refer into. It would also present an opportunity to engage professional working artists trained and experienced in working with marginalised people within a wellbeing and recovery framework to provide expert arts sector knowledge and connect and support people to engage with mainstream arts organisations in the long-term.

QAMH believe that encouraging communities to consider their own naturally occurring community resources and co-design a model suited to their own local context for GPs to refer into will be a key design feature of a successful social prescribing scheme. We already have examples which we can draw from. In its recent report [Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis](#), the Australia Council for the Arts recommended development of a national social prescribing scheme that draws on "the very effective and locally appropriate models that already exist in Australia rather than simply borrowing those from overseas contexts."¹⁴

We are aware of the following social prescribing models already demonstrating success in Queensland:

- Ways to Wellness is a collaboration between the Mt Gravatt Community Centre, Mt Gravatt Men's Shed, Queensland Community Alliance and the University of Queensland. It aims to tackle social isolation and loneliness with a whole-of-community approach. People in the community who are experiencing social isolation can self-refer to the service or be referred by their GP or allied health worker. Once referred, a Community Link Worker connects these socially isolated members of the community to meaningful group programs and activities.
- Wesley Mission Queensland has partnered with Australia Council for the Arts to pilot an 'Arts on Prescription' program, which encourages participation in arts and cultural pursuits to address the social determinants and social isolation that contribute to mental illness. Arts on Prescription acknowledges that resources already exist in the community to improve our

¹⁴ Australia Council of the Arts. (2022). *Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis*, p24 [Connected-Lives-Creative-solutions-to-the-mental-health-crisis-Web-version.pdf](#)

wellbeing beyond the traditional health system. The program aims to tap into these resources and give health professionals, including GPs, new ways of connecting people with arts and cultural endeavours. This project is still in its early delivery phase however an evaluation process is soon to be commenced.

QAMH note that the Arts-Health pilot programs listed earlier could also be utilised within a social prescribing framework to address social isolation and its associated mental health challenges.

As noted by the Australia Council for the Arts, we already have the template for social prescribing right here in Australia: what we need is greater coordination and upscaling of existing initiatives, plus political will to make it happen.

Support the Development of a Skilled Arts-Health Workforce

Any moves to expand Art-Health initiatives - including social prescribing for arts - in the future will require an appropriately skilled workforce, including a Peer Workforce.

QAMH supports the Australia Council of the Arts' recommendation:

“Recommendation 4: Support training and accreditation for artists and arts workers active in mental health settings, along with regulatory frameworks that establish the professional requirements, best practice standards, ethical frameworks, and appropriateness of different approaches.”¹⁵

In addition to having a skilled and ready workforce, QAMH note that developing a social prescribing scheme in Australia will need funding underpinning it, appropriate referral systems in place, integration with the established conventional/traditional supports, recognition of different perspectives such as First Nations and People with Multicultural and Diverse Backgrounds and Connections, and most importantly a change in attitude in how we approach wellbeing from a focus on “managing illness” to actively engaging in prevention by addressing the underlying social determinants of health.

¹⁵ Australia Council of the Arts. (2022). *Connected Lives: Creative solutions to the mental health crisis*, p10
[Connected-Lives-Creative-solutions-to-the-mental-health-crisis-Web-version.pdf](#)

Collect Data to Communicate the Wellbeing Impact of Arts Initiatives

“An effective cultural policy recognises the whole-of-government consequences of its principles and priorities. Culture permeates every facet of the human activities and economies which it is government’s role to enable, manage and regulate — it doesn’t exist in silos.”

Christos Tsiolkas and Clare Wright - *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, p12.

QAMH advocates for a whole-of-government approach to community mental health and wellbeing. We believe that - just as concepts such as ‘value for money’ or ‘cost-effectiveness’ are core components of government processes - the extent to which programs or policies impact the nation’s long-term wellbeing must be central to all decision making. Collecting data on the wellbeing impact of arts programs using measures that align with agreed wellbeing indicators is a powerful way to demonstrate the public value of arts programs. It would also assist to further develop the evidence base on the impact of Arts-Health initiatives and further strengthen the case for social prescribing in Australia.

In our [Measuring What Matters](#) submission, QAMH noted that it is important that we collect mental health indicators that move beyond clinical diagnostic criteria which focus on mental illness as opposed to mental wellbeing. Rather, indicators should incorporate holistic, person-centric, psychosocial measures across multiple life domains.

We suggest that suitable indicators that can be used to capture mental wellbeing data include:

- Mental Health Australia’s [Report to the Nation](#): This online questionnaire was designed by Ipsos, in collaboration with Mental Health Australia, and includes measures such as self-rated mental health over past three months, if they felt life has been filled with interesting/enjoyable things, if they felt part of a community, whether they needed mental health support.
- [Mental Wellbeing Index — Smiling Mind](#): This survey, designed by Smiling Mind and KPMG, uses data collected over a two-year period from more than 225,000 Australians. The index is released quarterly. It looks at six everyday mental wellbeing domains including emotional awareness, focus and concentration, emotional regulation, relationships and social connections, sleep and stress.
- [Harvard Flourishing Measure](#): These 12 items assess various domains of flourishing or human well-being in the following domains - Happiness and Life Satisfaction, Mental and

Physical Health, Meaning and Purpose, Character and Virtue, and Close Social Relationships.

QAMH is advocating for a national survey which would capture the above outcome measures. This should be administered by a truly independent body, with results to be broadly available to the public. We believe this separation from the machinery of government is fundamental to ensuring transparency and integrity of the data captured.

It is also important to note that none of these examples include a mechanism for measuring child and youth mental health outcomes. In the context of unprecedented rates of mental distress in younger age groups as a result of a number of factors including the Covid-19 pandemic, social media, climate change, social isolation and rising inequalities, QAMH believe a new outcome measure on student wellbeing is required.

Increase Recognition of Specific Cohorts

There are some cohorts – for example children – who may be best assisted primarily through creative arts therapies as this is the most appropriate intervention. This is a critical area of concern: statistics show that mental distress for children and youth has increased sharply during and post-pandemic and we need to be better prepared to address the mental health needs of young people. Likewise, there are some instances where conventional therapies are known to be retraumatising, for example when treating conditions such as CPTSD for which traditional “talk” therapies such as talking to a psychologist may re-trigger trauma and are considered less effective. Here arts interventions may play a critical role. QAMH would like to see greater recognition of these important areas of Arts-Health interventions in the new National Cultural Policy.

Commit to Communicating the Value of Arts for Wellbeing to the General Public

QAMH would like to see a commitment in the new National Cultural Policy to increase public awareness of the benefits of arts engagement for mental wellbeing, potentially through a coordinated health campaign. As noted by the Australia Council for the Arts, such a campaign would communicate and strengthen the wide-ranging benefits of arts engagement, lend support for an upscaled social prescribing scheme and help to address community wellbeing needs earlier than we currently are.

Ensure Grants Funding Timelines are Accessible

Currently, grant applications relevant to our members who work at the interface of arts and mental health in the community are all due at close to the same time of year. This makes it very difficult for arts organisations, especially smaller ones with limited funding, to prepare for funding rounds. QAMH ask that the Committee consider reviewing applicable arts funding timelines, distributing them evenly throughout the year to ensure that they are accessible.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation process. We look forward to continuing to work with the Australian Government to better the lives of people living with mental distress. Please do not hesitate to contact QAMH should you require any further information.