

Reboot the Australia Council, says industry body Live Performance Australia



Arts Centre Melbourne provides venues for subsidised companies and commercial producers. Picture: Jake Nowakowski

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The Australia Council as it stands should be scrapped and “repurposed” as a federal agency that can meet the needs of both the commercial and not-for-profit arts sectors, says industry body Live Performance Australia.

The peak body representing the \$4bn stage industry says the Australia Council is no longer fit for purpose, and that government has failed to understand the sector’s complex operating environment.

LPA chief executive Evelyn Richardson says the pandemic has highlighted the need for an overhaul of how government supports arts and entertainment businesses.

“We have found during the Covid-19 pandemic that government and its agencies have very little understanding of how the industry works, particularly with respect to how business models work in the commercial sector and the interconnectedness of the various parts of the industry – especially skills transfer and the fact we tour nationally,” she says.

LPA last week sent a pre-budget submission to Assistant Treasurer Michael Sukkar, setting out the industry's needs as it goes into the third year of the pandemic.

The body represents large commercial operators including concert promoters and producers of big-budget musicals – such as *Moulin Rouge!* and *Hamilton* – as well as subsidised theatre, opera and ballet companies.



Evelyn Richardson, chief executive of Live Performance Australia

Its budget submission calls for measures to address the acute shortage of skilled hands, low levels of investment and reduced tolerance for risk in an industry battered by waves of Covid lockdowns.

The proposal to repurpose the Australia Council is not given in detail but Richardson says the pandemic has prompted the need for a “serious rethink and restructuring” of government agencies and their dealings with the industry.

LPA says the Australia Council should be renamed Creative Australia and take charge of developing, investing in and advocating for the creative and cultural industries, both the not-for-profit and the commercial sectors.

The submission argues for a federal plan for sector development, and for a stand-alone department for creative and cultural industries, after the federal Office of the

Arts was subsumed into a communications and infrastructure mega department in 2019.

“Coming out of Covid-19 and in an election year, there should be a much stronger focus on reimagining a more fit-for-purpose framework and supporting investment arms to leverage the economic, social and cultural value of the creative industries,” Richardson says.

“We have invested significant time providing data, case studies and briefings across government to address this lack of knowledge and clearly we need to do more moving forward.”



Federal Arts Minister Paul Fletcher. Picture: Sam Mooy/Getty Images

Measures contained in LPA’s submission amount to \$345m. The largest item is a nationally co-ordinated scheme of business interruption insurance, which would “increase industry confidence to invest in reactivating or producing new live events and offset risks of Covid transmission interruption, future lockdowns, or reimposed restrictions”. Similar schemes have been introduced for the screen production industry and for live events in Britain and parts of Europe.

Industry is also calling for urgent training programs to address the undersupply of skilled staff such as sound and lighting technicians and stage managers. A training scheme, costed at \$4m, would help train new employees and upskill existing staff.

LPA has repeated its call for tax incentives for the live performance industry where producers can claim a percentage of qualifying expenditure, similar to producer offsets available to the screen industry. The proposal says the offset is cost-neutral to government when tax incentives are between 25 and 40 per cent.

Other measures include waiving visa fees for performing artists, creatives and crew, and boosting spending for Indigenous arts, regional programs, and live music.

The federal government says it is investing \$1bn in the arts this financial year, including base funding and industry-specific assistance measures. The Covid assistance package includes the \$200m RISE fund to help kickstart arts and entertainment production, which is available to commercial and not-for-profit operators.



Rachel Healy, chair of the federal government's Creative Economy Taskforce

Arts Minister Paul Fletcher also established the 12-member Creative Economy Taskforce to advise government on industry needs through the pandemic. Chaired

by Adelaide Festival co-artistic director Rachel Healy, it includes members from both the subsidised and commercial sectors.

The LPA submission recommends boosting the Australia Council's funding for the major performing arts framework and the four-year grants program, and to establish a reserves rebuilding fund.

The Australia Council largely exists to support the subsidised arts – it distributed \$194m in grants last year – but Richardson says this “silo model” is no longer appropriate.

“The current silo model has long reached its use-by date and business as usual is not going to cut it both in terms of rebuilding capacity (and) in having a more ambitious vision for what could be achieved locally and internationally,” she says.

Australia's broad policy settings for the creative and cultural industries lag behind those of Britain, Canada and New Zealand, she says.

“Those countries are light years ahead of Australia with respect to these strategic frameworks,” Richardson says. “We operate in a global context but tend to have a very parochial view when it comes to how the creative and cultural industries are viewed.

“There is a serious need for government agencies to reflect a broader and more strategic vision and this would include repurposing the Australia Council to form Creative Australia.”