

# A New Approach (ANA)

## Submission to Queensland Parliament: Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland

Arts, culture and creativity support improved mental and physical health outcomes, build community connection and reduce social isolation

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18 August 2021

Committee Secretary  
[CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:CSSC@parliament.qld.gov.au)  
Community Support and Services Committee  
Parliament House, George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000

## Evidence for arts, culture and creativity supporting reduced social isolation and loneliness

A New Approach (ANA) is Australia's leading arts and culture think tank, with a vision for an Australia that celebrates, benefits from, and invests in arts, culture and creativity for the benefit of all Australians. This submission outlines evidence for arts, culture and creativity supporting reduced social isolation and loneliness in Queensland and puts forward opportunities for consideration by the Committee. It draws from ANA's review of the national and international evidence as well as new qualitative research with young and middle-aged 'middle Australians.'

**The Issue:** Across Australia, including in Queensland, people are reporting increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

One in four Australians reported frequent feelings of loneliness, and the risks of premature death due to loneliness and social isolation have been found to be as big or bigger than obesity, smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, or air pollution. It is widely acknowledged that this has a serious impact on the physical and mental health of many Australians, and that many Queenslanders at risk of loneliness—such as seniors, young people, people with mental illness and people with disability—are increasingly vulnerable.

**State-level solution:** Targeted investment that supports statewide access to arts and cultural experiences in metropolitan, regional and remote communities.

**National-level solution:** Develop a National Plan for Arts, Culture and Creativity to establish an equitable framework to support industry recovery and growth, employment and innovation for the benefit of all Australians.

In research conducted by ANA in 2020 with middle Australians and then in 2021 with young middle Australians, the evidence was clear that arts and culture are central to daily life. Both groups reported that arts and culture build community connection, reduce social isolation, and improve health outcomes. They also felt strongly that access should not be dependent on where you live.

Now in a time of crisis, arts and culture are more critical than ever. Research shows that, during and following major crises, effective arts and cultural activities are those that aim to reconnect affected communities, strengthen people's connection to place, provide opportunities for reflection and commemoration, and foster a shared sense of hope and optimism. A systematic and strategic approach to developing a strong, rich cultural life that brings people together and strengthens communities is required. In our role as a philanthropically funded, independent think tank, ANA is able to provide evidence-based advice about options for the recommendations outlined in this submission and would welcome the opportunity to discuss them.

Warm regards,



Kate Fielding, CEO, A New Approach (ANA)

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## SUMMARY

### Key Insights

- Strategic investment in arts and culture deliver social benefits to communities. It builds feelings of community, belonging and trust; helps combat loneliness and isolation; and helps recovery from disasters and trauma.
- Engagement with arts and cultural activities also delivers individual physical and mental health benefits. It has been shown to help people grow their social networks and increase control over their circumstances leading to social capital and feelings of autonomy, both which have a central influence on determinants of health.
- Middle Australians (middle-aged, middle income swing voters from suburban and regional Australia) consider arts and culture to be essential to the Australian way of life and report that it helps them to understand and accept differences, increases their connection with community and decreases social isolation.
- Young middle Australians (children of Middle Australians aged 18 - 29) also consider arts and culture to be embedded in and inseparable from everyday life, reporting that it brings people together, gives them a reason to be part of their community, helps them feel better about the world and connects them to others with shared problems.

### Key Opportunities

- **Champion a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan**  
Champion a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan to inform more coherent policy settings and investment at all three levels of government, including at a state level.
- **Consider targeted initiatives for young people**  
Prioritise using arts and cultural activities in existing and new initiatives to reduce loneliness and social isolation among young people especially in place-making and community-building. Recognise that young people are creators, consumers, co-collaborators and enthusiastic attendees.
- **Prioritise arts and culture programs for key health areas**  
Capitalise on the proven positive mental and physical health impacts of arts and cultural interventions in treating loneliness and develop programs to extend these benefits across Queensland communities.
- **Build and strengthen communities**  
Prioritise new investment in cultural participation programs and arts initiatives that are proven to bring communities together, build social connections and encourage inclusion and social cohesion.
- **Teach benefits of participation in arts and culture at school**  
Consistently teach children about the benefits of participating in arts and culture, especially those from lower- to middle-income families or those living in outer suburban and regional areas.
- **Reduce barriers children and young people face in accessing arts and cultural experiences**  
Invest in subsidy programs for arts and cultural activities and/or tuition to ensure that cost is not a barrier to access for any Queensland child.

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## INSIGHTS IN DETAIL

### How arts and culture impact societal outcomes

Strategic investment in arts and culture demonstrably delivers social benefits to communities and places. Some of Australia's most pressing social issues, including social isolation and loneliness, can be helped through effective investment in proven arts and cultural activities and methodologies.

Australians are increasingly reporting frequent feelings of loneliness and isolation. Recently, one in four Australians reported frequent feelings of loneliness and isolation and 36% reported feeling like a stranger in their own country. Early studies suggest Covid-19 has amplified these feelings. Now in a time of crisis, arts and culture are more critical than ever.

Leading Australian and international research shows that when a considered effort is made to increase access and participation in arts and cultural activities the impacts are significant including building feelings of community, belonging and trust; helping combat loneliness and isolation; and helping recovery from disasters and trauma.

Figure 1:  
How arts and culture helps build  
a more cohesive society



Internationally strategies for improving societal outcomes through arts and culture have also generated positive social impacts. Investment in public arts and cultural events has been found to bring people together and bridge social barriers through shared experiences while also decreasing loneliness. Arts and cultural activities that reflect and explore diverse perspectives are proven opportunities for people to identify with others, reducing cultural bias. Further to this, investment in creative activities that address trauma has been found to successfully support individuals and communities to engage with arts and culture in a way that promotes recovery while also increasing community connection and civic participation.

This is supported by recent research conducted by ANA with middle Australians in 2020, towards the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research found that middle Australians—that is middle-aged, middle income swing voters from suburban and regional Australia—consider arts and culture to be essential to the Australian way of life and value it for participation, belonging and community. Participants in the research reported that arts and culture help them to understand each other, encourage unity in diversity, increase acceptance of differences across society, increase connection with community and decrease isolation.

*Arts and culture really brings people and whole communities together. Without it, we'd be much more isolated as individuals. That's never a good outcome. (Male, QLD)*

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*I suppose it [arts and culture] builds tolerance, and it's about being open to diversity or the acceptance of other people that they may not be exposed to in their own family. (Female, QLD)*

*Arts and culture provide something out of the ordinary. It provides something to look forward to and relax. It's an opportunity to socialise—we'd definitely be more isolated if we didn't have it. I can't imagine something else that we'd do to achieve this. (Female, QLD)*

These findings were also mirrored in ANA's most recent research with young middle Australians, that is children of middle Australians or young people aged 18 - 29 living in suburban or regional Australia. Young middle Australians reported that arts and culture are embedded in and inseparable from everyday life, and a world without them elicited images of social isolation and loneliness. Young people reported that arts and culture brought people together, gave them a reason to be part of their community, and helped them understand the diversity of their community. They also reported that arts and culture are tools they use to help them feel better about the world, lift their mood and connect them with others experiencing the same problems.

*It's massive in my life...for young people, our age, it's huge. Living in Brisbane, it's like, if you didn't have the arts, that would suck, and you would want to move to Melbourne, which is known for its art and stuff like that. It would be high on my list, if I was thinking of who to elect, and what their stance is on the arts. (Male, QLD)*

*I think it would feel quite isolated and lonely. I guess, again, for me, culture is community and experience. And without that, I don't think you'd be able to express creativity at all without some form of art or culture. So I think it would be a very lonely, sad place. (Female, QLD)*

*Yeah, the internet has definitely helped with that, and having this online presence and things, I feel like really helps us stay connected. And that really means that arts and culture just became this much bigger, more developed part of our lives. (Female, QLD)*

Recognising this combination of public and individual benefit, many young people interviewed as part of the research suggested that governments have a role to play in supporting and encouraging access to arts and cultural opportunities.

## Opportunities to improve societal outcomes through investment in arts and culture

There is now an opportunity to refresh policy settings and create a more coherent investment approach across governments, businesses, philanthropic organisations and creators. Policy makers, public and private investors and other stakeholders who want to improve societal outcomes and decrease social isolation and loneliness should:

- Apply learnings to address loneliness**  
 Invest in research trials for Australia-specific arts and cultural interventions addressing loneliness and social isolation and other relevant health and/or wellbeing issues and implement data-driven programs to achieve optimal outcomes.
- Consider targeted initiatives for young people**  
 Prioritise using arts and cultural activities in existing and new initiatives to reduce loneliness and social isolation among young people especially in place-making and community-building recognising that young people can be creators, consumers, co-collaborators and enthusiastic attendees.
- Build and strengthen communities**  
 Prioritise new investment in cultural participation programs and arts initiatives that are proven to bring communities together, build social connections and encourage inclusion and cohesion.

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- **Enhance regional and rural development**

Support initiatives for regional and remote Australia to benefit from cultural infrastructure (both built and human) – including economic diversification, community wellbeing and population attraction and retention.

There is also an opportunity for policy makers, public and private investors and other stakeholders to improve arts and cultural access and participation opportunities for all Queenslanders while also informing a contemporary approach to cultural and creative industry development and addressing Covid-19 recovery by:

- **Champion a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan**

A National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan would inform more coherent policy settings and investment at all three levels of government.

## How arts and culture impact physical and mental health outcomes

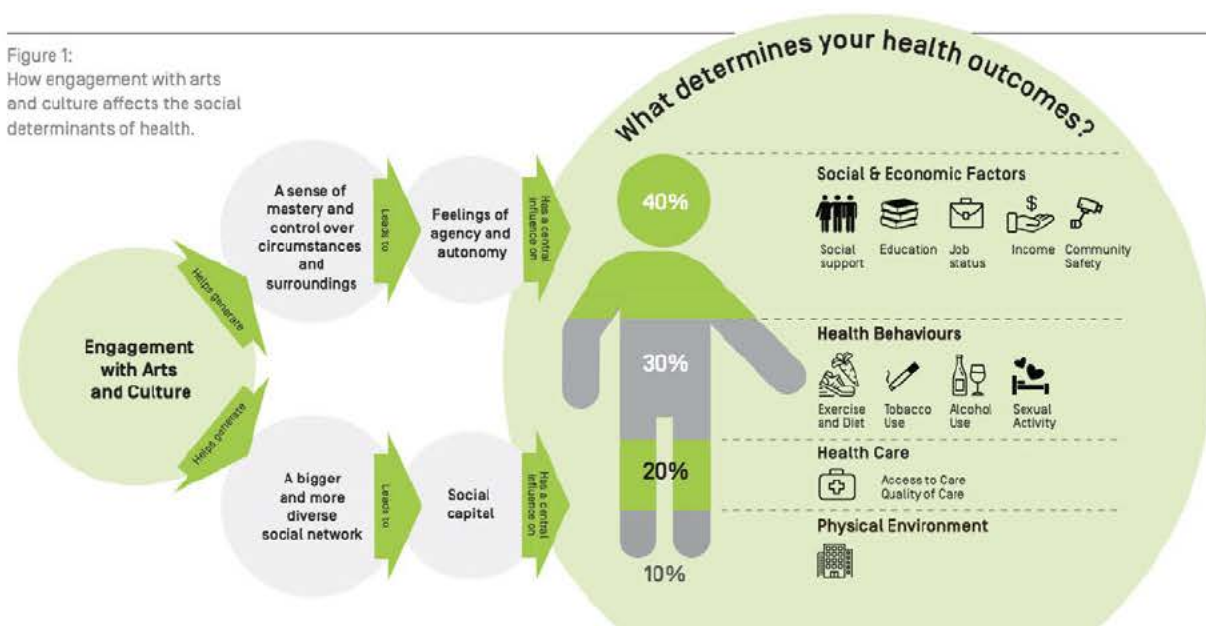
Arts and culture, when used in both clinical and wellbeing settings, has been shown to deliver positive physical and mental health outcomes. The relationship between engagement with arts and culture and health is indirect but strong and is evidenced by recent Australian and international research.

Prior to Covid-19, Australia was already facing significant healthcare concerns, including declining social cohesion in both metropolitan and regional communities, leading to a range of negative health outcomes. Australia has strong policies about how arts and culture can be used to influence the social determinants of health however these policies are often not being systematically implemented.

Research shows that engagement with arts and cultural activities reduces health risks, including risks directly influenced by the existence of social networks. Arts and cultural engagement has been shown to help people grow their social networks and increase control over their circumstances which in turn leads to social capital and feelings of autonomy, both which have an influence on the social determinants of health.

Figure 1:

How engagement with arts and culture affects the social determinants of health.



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Supporting this, in 2016 Australian researchers found that two-hour 'doses' of creative activities per week could enhance mental health and wellbeing in a general population. ANA's research with Middle Australians also directly connected participating in arts and cultural activities to experiencing better mental health. Those interviewed reported benefits of participation as increased happiness, reduced stress and reduced likelihood of substance abuse.

*I don't know if this is relevant, but without [arts and culture], it affects our health department and all the things. I think if you don't have culture - all those sorts of things - people get mental health issues. All of these things make us happier, which is better for our mental health. Without those things, there is a lot more strain on services like that. (Female, QLD)*

Young middle Australians interviewed in ANA's most recent research also confirmed how arts and culture can bring a sense of connectedness, happiness and hope at a time when a third of all young Australians report serious or very serious concerns about their mental health. Young people interviewed described the way that arts and culture - and most commonly music - helped them lift their mood or work through a difficult emotion or experience. Young people also reported connecting in a 'low key' way in online arts and cultural spaces like TikTok, Instagram and Twitch and being able to do this at their own pace when needed was positive for their mental health and wellbeing.

*I think it's important that everyone has the ability to express their creativity in whatever form.. And I think it's also really important to have that creativity for mental health as well. And having mental health care workers stimulating people's creativity as well. (Female, QLD)*

Again, a number of young people interviewed made a direct connection between arts and culture and mental health at a societal level, and the role of government in ensuring the right policy settings exist so that society can maximise the benefits.

## Opportunities to improve health outcomes through investment in arts and culture

The evidence is clear - effective investment in arts and culture generates tangible and measurable health and wellbeing outcomes. These in turn can also flow on to generate further economic, social and other benefits. In light of this evidence, public and private investors, policy makers and other stakeholders who want to improve health and wellbeing outcomes should:

- Develop an arts and culture participation program**  
 Develop a public participation campaign promoting the benefits of creative activity, similar to public health campaigns promoting regular exercise, regular health checks or diet modifications. This campaign could be supported by arts-and-culture health-based programs delivered in government-run health care facilities.
- Prioritise arts and culture programs for key health areas**  
 Capitalise on the proven positive impacts of arts and cultural interventions in treating loneliness and develop programs to extend these benefits across Queensland communities.
- Develop evidence-based arts and culture health interventions**  
 Establish randomised-controlled trials for interventions to develop effective programs with maximised benefits.
- Acknowledge the critical role that online communities play in the lives of young people**  
 Build safe, vibrant, accessible online spaces in which young people can meet and connect over arts and cultural experiences and activities understanding that these spaces are vital to building a sense of belonging.

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- **Teach benefits of participation in arts and culture at school**

Consistently teach children about the benefits of participating in arts and culture, especially those from lower-to middle-income families or those living in outer suburban and regional areas.

- **Reduce barriers children and young people face in accessing arts and cultural experiences**

Subsidy programs for arts and cultural activities and/or tuition would benefit children and ensure that cost is not a barrier to access for any Queensland child.

To improve arts and cultural health and wellbeing opportunities for all Queenslanders, inform a contemporary approach to cultural and creative industry development, and address Covid-19 recovery, public and private investors, policy makers and other stakeholders should:

- **Champion a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan**

A National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan would inform more coherent policy settings and investment at all three levels of government.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information about the evidence base that forms the basis of this submission is available in the following publications:

Fielding, Kate, Iva Glisic, and Jodie-Lee Trembath, 'Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity.' Insight Series. Canberra: A New Approach and The Australian Academy of Humanities, 2019

Fielding, K., Trembath, J.L., 2020, 'A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity'. Produced by A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

Trembath, J.L., Fielding, K., August 2021. 'The next generation of voters: Young middle Australians talk arts, culture and creativity'. Insight Series. Paper no. 2021-02. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia.

Trembath, J.L., Fielding, K., May 2021. "Imagining 2030: Preparing for a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan". Analysis paper no. 2021-01. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia

These publications, as well as further research, papers and submissions, are available at our website: [newapproach.org.au](http://newapproach.org.au)

## ABOUT A NEW APPROACH (ANA)

Australians from every walk of life participate in and benefit from arts, culture and creativity. Australia's leading arts and culture think tank, A New Approach (ANA) makes this evident through independent research and analysis. ANA's work informs discussion, inspires public policy and brings together decision makers and industry leaders around evidence-led ideas and pathways for pragmatic action. ANA's staff, board, expert advisory and philanthropic partners are driven by a shared vision of a cultural life that emboldens Australia.

ANA is supported by 11 philanthropic partners: The Myer Foundation; Sidney Myer Fund; Tim Fairfax Family Foundation; The Ian Potter Foundation; Neilson Foundation; Minderoo Foundation; Besen Family Foundation; Spinifex Trust; The Keir Foundation; Aranday Foundation; and The Yulgi bar Foundation.

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