



Australian Government

Australia
Council
for the Arts



Bringing it Forward

Summary of findings from the
consultation on a national body
for First Nations arts and culture



Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and cultural expressions are a powerful source of strength, resilience, pride and wellbeing. They showcase talent, innovation and excellence; and bring communities together in celebration, healing, and the grounding force of identity. They connect us to the land on which we live, and to 75,000 years of unbroken civilisation, knowledge, story and song.

The idea of a national body for First Nations arts and culture is not new – it is part of a continuum of First Nations-led cultural rights advocacy, and investment in First Nations arts, that stretches back five decades to the first national summit of First Nations artists in 1973 (see *Timeline: half a century of cultural rights advocacy*).

‘We all feel deep inside ourselves things which we want to say about life around us, about the people we live with, about our Country, about the past we come from, about the future we hope for.’

Dick Roughsey, Aboriginal Arts Board Chair, National Seminar, Aboriginal Arts in Australia, 1973

A consultation on a national body or ‘NIACA’

In 2018 and 2019, the Australia Council responded to calls from sector participants to help move this idea forward. The Council acted as an interim secretariat to support a national consultation process on a proposed national body for First Nations arts and culture, with the working title of **‘National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA)’**.¹

The NIACA concept was born out of a 2008 proposal from the National Indigenous Arts Reference Group of the Australia Council’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board: to combine Terri Janke’s idea for a national authority to protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)² and a peak body for First Nations arts.

¹ The discussion paper noted that the term NIACA is a working title and may be subject to change. In the consultation findings, the terms ‘NIACA’ and ‘national body’ are used interchangeably.

² Terri Janke 2009, *Beyond Guarding Ground: A vision for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority*, Terri Janke and Company

The consultation involved:

- a discussion paper
- an online survey
- written submissions
- over 40 consultation forums across Australia attended by more than 500 First Nations people
- regional summits
- expert roundtables for young people and industry.

‘It’s about our self-determination.’

First Nations survey respondent

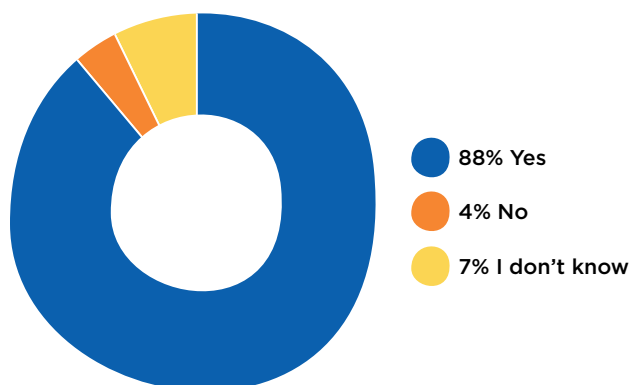
The Australia Council is publishing the findings of this consultation, and its history and context, so that the First Nations arts and cultural sector can continue the discussion and self-determine the next steps on this journey. The Australia Council is committed to building on our long-term commitment to First Nations arts and culture as one of the five objectives of our strategy, *Creativity Connects Us*.³

Key consultation findings

The vast majority of consultation participants supported a national body

All submissions, the overwhelming majority of consultation forums and 88% of First Nations survey respondents told us, yes, there should be a NIACA (Figure 1).

Figure 1: 88% of First Nations survey respondents told us, yes, there should be a NIACA



Source: Online survey. Based on answers from 95 First Nations respondents.

‘I can’t understand why there isn’t one already.’

First Nations survey respondent

‘Yes, because it will bring First Nations people together to have a stronger voice.’

First Nations forum

³ See Australia Council 2021, ‘First Nations arts and culture are cherished,’ in *Creativity Connects Us: Corporate Plan 2021-25*. The Council also has a statutory role to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice under Section 9(1)(ba) of the Australia Council Act 2013 (Cth).

Areas of strong agreement

Recurring themes of the consultation included needs for:

- a First Nations-led body for First Nations arts and culture at the national level
- greater ICIP protection
- action to address fake art and cultural appropriation
- a national body to develop or oversee protocols that set standards for consent processes
- a platform for First Nations artists' and cultural practitioners' voices at a national level
- a model that coordinates, supports and champions local and regional decision making and existing regional and art form-based bodies
- a non-hierarchical structure that reflects First Nations cultures, such as an 'assembly of nations'.

'Other areas such as health and law have national representation.'

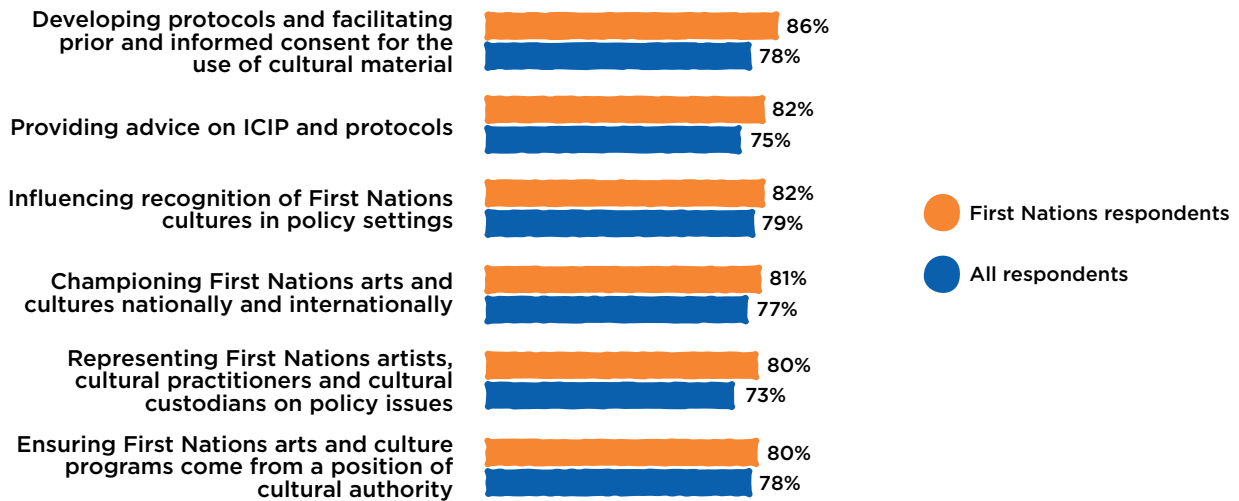
First Nations survey respondent

'An agency that oversees the protocols, building on what has already been achieved.'

First Nations forum

The six activities rated 'high priority' by the most First Nations respondents related to protocols, facilitating consent processes, advice, advocacy and representation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The six activities rated 'high priority' by the most First Nations survey respondents



Source: Online survey. Others responded, 'medium priority,' 'low priority/'not a priority,' 'I don't know,' or skipped the question. Based on answers from the 91 First Nations respondents and 256 total respondents who told us 'yes' there should be a NIACA or 'I don't know'.

Areas of concern or disagreement

While most consultation participants supported a national body in principle, they also had concerns about:

- its ambition
- its need for funding sustainability in an already oversubscribed sector
- duplicating the work of existing peak bodies and services
- reflecting the diversity of First Nations people
- how power and authority would be gained and delegated.

There were conflicting views on:

- whether it should have 'teeth'
 - 'Authority' was a trigger word for some, who suggested alternative terms such as 'forum', 'national body', 'alliance', 'portal' and 'agency'.
- the scope of cultural material it would cover
 - While nearly all participants thought it should cover the arts, some within the First Nations arts and cultural sector felt a NIACA should use a holistic approach by including other areas such as languages and cultural property.

'NIACA shouldn't double up on services.'

First Nations survey respondent

'Agency rather than an authority, a linking – a "go to" place.'

First Nations forum

'Aboriginal Model, you can't separate culture from arts and languages.'

First Nations forum



Participants proposed a way forward

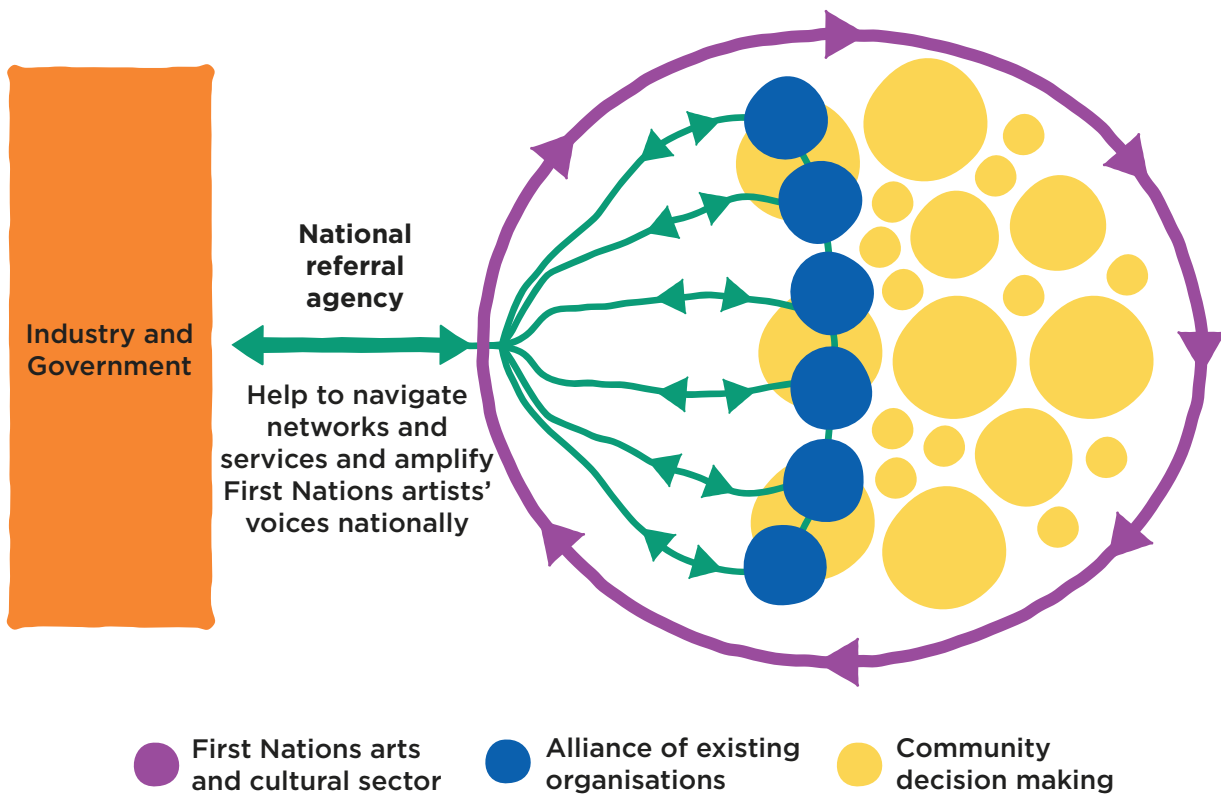
Despite these views and concerns, there was substantial agreement that a national body for First Nations arts and culture is needed to fill a gap in national infrastructure, and could be formed via a network or alliance of existing organisations across art forms and regions.

‘...first stage is just to resource the orgs who already exist to come together and form NIACA.’

First Nations survey respondent

Many participants spoke of the national body as an agile ‘facilitator’, ‘coordinator’, ‘connector’ or ‘go to’ referral agency which could work both-ways: acting as a portal to First Nations arts and culture for industry and government; and helping First Nations artists to navigate existing networks and services and have their voices heard nationally (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A two-way connector and best practice interface



And while there were some different ideas about specific priorities and the tools it would use (which could change over time), there was consensus about the core values of a national body:

- self-determination
- empowering, connecting and amplifying existing strengths
- growing opportunities
- protecting cultural and creative rights for future generations.

Some immediate priorities participants identified include forming a body that is First Nations-led with a clearly defined purpose; mapping existing organisations, services and gaps; and creating a space for conversation between all art forms, communities and networks.

There is substantial opportunity for such a body to support intersecting areas of policy development underway. This includes the Closing the Gap commitment to shared decision-making through structures such as national peak bodies; proposed cultural rights legislation and referral pathways for artists; investment in the cultural determinants of First Nations health; and national cultural policy that respects and celebrates First Nations cultures.

As intersecting policy discussions continue, this opportunity and knowledge must not be lost – we must continue to build on the discussions, learnings and collective efforts of the journey towards a national body for First Nations arts and culture.

‘Let’s listen and learn from all these efforts and ideas. Together, we can self-determine what the next steps should be in this journey, in holding and caring for our cultural inheritance and *Bringing it Forward.*’

Australia Council’s First Nations Strategy Panel



For more information see:

- *Bringing it Forward: The journey towards a national body for First Nations arts and culture (detailed report)*
- *Timeline: half a century of cultural rights advocacy*

Notes on terminology

In this report:

- **'NIACA'** is used interchangeably with 'national body' as working terms subject to change.
- The terms **'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous'** are used interchangeably. The Australia Council primarily uses the term 'First Nations' in recognition of First Nations peoples' role as the original owners and custodians of this country.
- The terms **'arts', 'culture', 'artists' and 'cultural practitioners'** are used without definition. The Australia Council recognises that First Nations arts and cultures are inextricably connected; are diverse; are not static; and are anchored to 75,000 years of living cultural knowledge.
- The term **'Cultural custodians'** is used for consistency with language used in the consultation. However, this term is not used across nations. In community, people hold different statuses and obligations, and are referred to using a range of terms including Elders, cultural bosses, law/lore men and women, cultural custodians or cultural practitioners.
- The term **'Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property' or 'ICIP'** includes intangible and tangible aspects of cultural heritage and materials, including but not limited to literary, performing and artistic works, through to cultural property, cultural sites, languages and human remains.

