

**Submission
No 81**

**INQUIRY INTO INTEGRITY, EFFICACY AND VALUE FOR
MONEY OF NSW GOVERNMENT GRANT PROGRAMS**

Organisation: Writing NSW
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Submission to: the Parliamentary inquiry into the integrity, efficacy and value for money of NSW government grant programs

From: Writing NSW

This submission covers issues related to arts funding, especially for small-to-medium organisations and individual writers.

About Writing NSW

Writing NSW is the state's premier organisation for writers, providing support and services to thousands of writers each year. A not-for-profit association, the organisation has been supported by the state government since its establishment in 1991, both through direct grants and the provision of subsidised accommodation at its headquarters in Callan Park, Lilyfield.

Until the end of 2019, it also offered a program of small grants for writers and emerging writing organisations through devolved funding from Create NSW. Those grants offered invaluable support to a diverse range of writers and organisations in a more nimble and responsive way than is possible with government-run grant programs, while still maintaining the high levels of transparency and accountability that are essential when distributing public funds. At a cost of only \$30,000 per year, the program delivered extraordinary benefits to NSW writers and unwriting. Unfortunately, the decision was made to end all devolved funding programs at the end of 2019 without any apparent evaluation of their outcomes.

Range and availability of funding

Total funding for the arts is low in NSW compared with other states. The recent multi-year funding round for arts organisations in NSW, for example, granted a total of \$10 million in funding to be shared by 58 organisations across all artforms. That compares with the \$45.4 million shared by the 130 key organisations funded by Creative Victoria.

If overall funding for the arts is low in NSW, the situation is even more dire when it comes to literature. Literature received just 5.7% of total multi-year funding, less than any other artform. Only four literature organisations were funded, compared with 11 dance organisations, 12 theatre organisations and 10 visual arts organisations. Writing



NSW, the state's premier organisation for writers, lost its ongoing funding as a result, despite being recommended for funding by the artform advisory board.

The other striking outcome of the multi-year funding round was the poor representation of service organisations among those funded. A number of service organisations that lost their ongoing funding are now, like Writing NSW, facing an uncertain future. Service organisations will always come off worse when they are required to compete for scarce funding against more glamorous public-facing organisations. Without them, though, the cultural life of our state will be much poorer. Organisations like Writing NSW are the engine rooms of the state's cultural life, nurturing and developing artists from the earliest stages of their careers through to international success. A funding system that turns away from these vital support systems will end up destroying the very thing it aims to achieve.

Artistic organisations and service organisations are very different entities with different aims and outcomes. Currently, they are assessed in the same funding rounds against the same criteria, often with individual artists also in the mix. For the assessors, it is like comparing apples with oranges. Each of these three groups would be better served by dedicated funding rounds with targeted application procedures and criteria.

Overall, the accessibility of NSW government funding is undermined by the onerous and unpredictable nature of the funding process.

As CEO of Writing NSW, and as a writer, I have written grant applications to all levels of government and I have also been a peer assessor for both federal and state funding bodies. The NSW application process is the most cumbersome and time-intensive of any I have seen, placing considerable barriers in the way of under-resourced organisations and individual writers. A single application can easily require several weeks of work, not a viable option for many given the low success rates and relatively small amounts of money available. This is a major issue for emerging artists and organisations, particularly those from marginalised communities.

Compounding this problem is the lack of clear and timely communication around funding programs. The dates of funding rounds are generally not announced in advance, making it impossible for organisations or individual artists to plan for the time needed to complete applications. Outcomes of funding programs are also often announced late, in some cases even after the period covered by the funding has started.

The funding assessment process

Under a new system introduced in 2019, applications for arts funding are assessed by artform advisory boards comprised of industry experts appointed by the Minister. These boards make recommendations on funding to the Minister, who makes the final decision. This differs from the federal grants system, which is administered at arm's length from government by the Australia Council, increasing public confidence in the transparency and integrity of the process.

The new artform boards replaced a previous system that saw new groups of external assessors assembled for each funding round. The new system has strengths, in that board members could be expected through their two-year period of service to develop an in-depth knowledge of the ecosystem of their artform to guide them in making decisions.

However, it also creates a substantial risk of conflict of interest as most board members are also associated with applications for funding that go before the same board, whether as individuals or on behalf of organisations. Board members obviously do not participate in the assessment of their own applications, but they may be allowed to assess applications that are in direct competition with their own for the same small pot of money. This would not be allowed under the federal arts funding system. While there is no suggestion any board members have acted improperly, there is a widespread perception across the arts sector that conflicts of interest in relation to the artform boards are not being properly managed.

The boards have also been criticised for a lack of diversity in their membership, raising concerns that applications from diverse groups may be disadvantaged in the process.

Possible improvements to the funding system

A number of measures would improve the efficiency, effectiveness, accessibility and accountability of the arts funding system:

- Streamlining of the application process to make it more accessible to a diverse range of applicants, including simplification of forms
- Separate funding rounds for artistic organisations, service organisations, and individual artists, with targeted application requirements and criteria for each group

- Reinstatement of devolved funding programs designed for emerging artists and organisations, allowing simpler application processes and faster response times for those who would be less likely to be successful in government-run funding rounds, including Indigenous, regional and culturally diverse writers
- Early publication of fixed dates for funding rounds, including opening, closing and announcement dates
- Stringent management of potential conflicts of interest on the artform advisory boards
- More transparency around the funding recommendations made by the artform advisory boards
- More transparency around how decisions are made about the proportion of funding allocated to each artform

The single biggest improvement that could be made to arts funding in NSW would, of course, be to increase the total amount of funding available, particularly for underfunded artforms such as literature.

I would be happy to provide further information on request.

Jane McCredie
CEO, Writing NSW

Disclosure: Jane McCredie was a member of the artform advisory board for literature until 4 August 2020.