

Sunday 23 August 2020

The Director
Public Accountability Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

Re: Inquiry into the integrity, efficacy and value for money of NSW Government grant programs

Dear Committee Members,

This submission has been prepared by Theatre Network NSW, MusicNSW, Ausdance NSW and Regional Arts NSW, who collectively represent artists and arts workers in the theatre, performance, dance, music and regional arts sectors of New South Wales.

We recognise and welcome the important investment that the NSW Government provides the Arts through a range of industry and cross-industry funding programs. We acknowledge the hard work of staff at Government bodies such as Create NSW, which administers funding on behalf of the State Government, and provides substantial support for artists and organisations across the sector.

In preparation for this submission, Theatre Network NSW (TNN) undertook a sector-wide survey to gather the thoughts and opinions of NSW based artists and arts workers. This anonymous survey included six questions that primarily reflected Point 1, subpoint B of this Inquiry's Terms of Reference, as follows:

1. Overall, has your experience with NSW Government Grant Programs been: (select one)?
2. If you have applied for funding to a NSW Government Grant Program (either successful or unsuccessful), did you receive clear and appropriate feedback on your application?
3. Do you believe that NSW Government Grant Program funding decisions (and the processes they have followed) are suitably transparent?
4. Do you feel the NSW Government is investing appropriate levels of funding to support and build a sustainable performing arts industry?
5. Do you have trust in NSW Government Grant Program outcomes?
6. Do you have any additional comments or examples you wish to add?

This survey received 86 responses. Although this is only a sample of NSW artists and arts workers, we offer that the ongoing anecdotal and informal feedback received by all of the organisations named here supports the findings that this sample provides.

Outlined below is an analysis of the statistical data unearthed by the survey, alongside a commentary of key concerns and challenges, as provided by the survey participants. We note that there are misconceptions and misunderstandings between the sector and the Department; and about the decision making process, which pose challenges when assessing the current funding models. The survey however does raise a number of key issues and concerns.

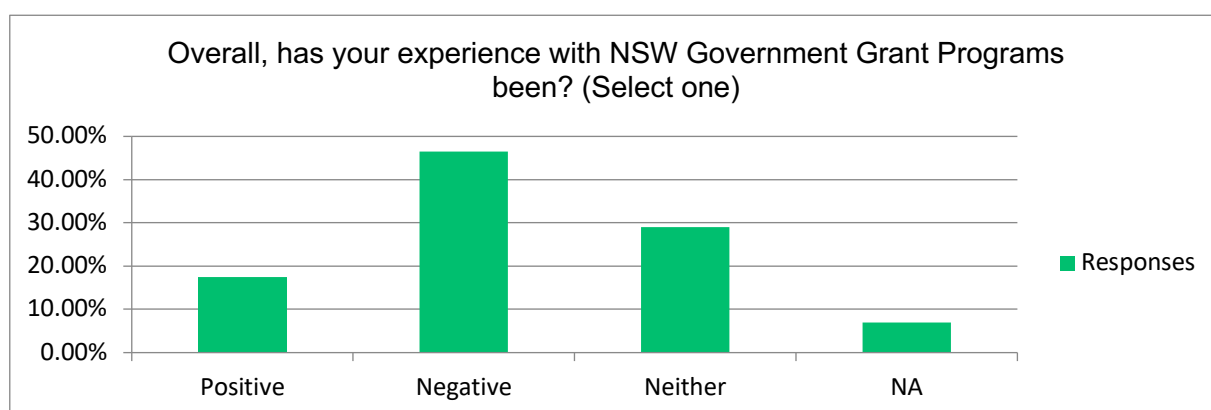
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2020 NSW GOVERNMENT GRANT SURVEY OUTCOMES

1. Overall, has your experience with NSW Government Grant Programs been? (Select one)

There was a mixed response to participants' overall experience with the NSW Government Grant Programs. 46.51% of respondents stated that their overall experience was negative, 17.44% of respondents had positive experiences and 29.07% were ambivalent. There is recognition that departmental staff work hard and are supportive, however they are often restricted in what they can do for the sector due to external forces. Issues that have impacted negatively on people's experience include long delays in announcing funding decisions, Ministerial influence on outcomes, lack of accessibility within funding programs, and onerous bureaucratic processes.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Positive	17.44%	15
Negative	46.51%	40
Neither	29.07%	25
NA	6.98%	6
Any comments and/or specific examples you would like to add.		47
	Answered	86
	Skipped	0



Commentary:

"Unclear communication, long delays, missed agreed timeframes. Often have the same conversation meeting after meeting. No clear action within the Department for greater disability inclusion. Often told the department doesn't have the budget to provide access in relation to updating online accessibility."

"Communication is extremely poor. Announcement dates were set by Create NSW, but then not adhered to. No information given to applicants about the delay. There is still no announcement on the LGA multi years - they were supposed to be informed at the end of May."

"My own experience over the years but not recently has been positive, as I have been in a situation where I didn't directly apply for funding. Staff in the time I was a peer were exemplary. It has come to my knowledge however, that recent experiences via clients/artform peers of mine have been less than positive."

"We have had mixed experiences over the years. Often the engagement with staff is positive. But there is a feeling of powerlessness from them. They would like to help you but they cannot. They are hamstrung by either the Minister or their own bureaucratic processes. Nothing stands out as particularly "bad" except the delays that roll on. One year we did not find out about our annual funding till January of the year we were funded! The shifting priorities of funding are often problematic for artists with a long standing practice. Fashions come and go with both art and funding categories. Is there any real depth behind the politics of the Grants Program?"

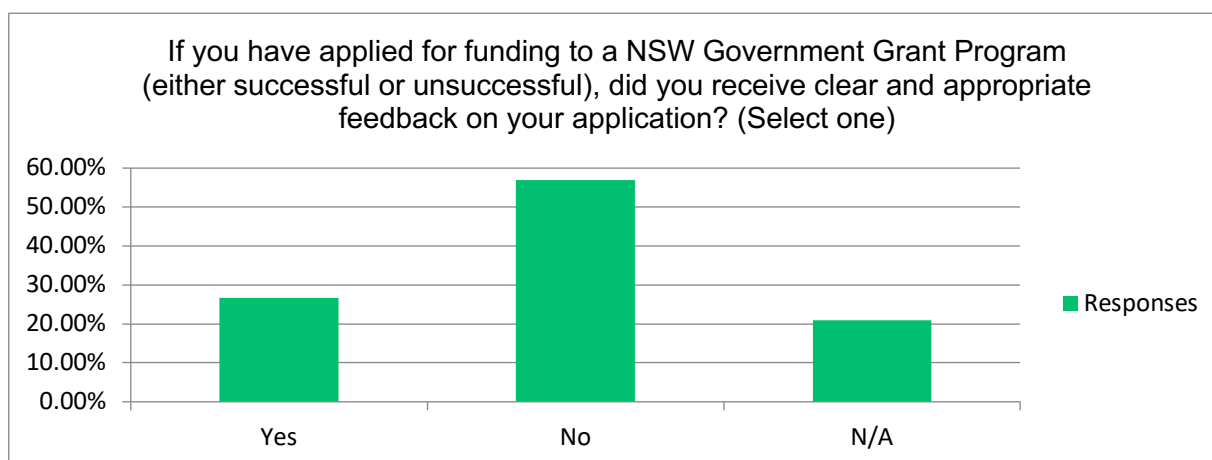
"I say positive because we were awarded funding, however the process was frustrating for both the sector and I suspect the Create NSW team. The delays at this time were incredibly stressful and the lack of information or clarity that the team at Create were able to provide compounded the stress."

"MIXED - Slow decisions, staff don't have influence, Minister is controlling with biased approach."

2. If you have applied for funding to a NSW Government Grant Program (either successful or unsuccessful), did you receive clear and appropriate feedback on your application?

Feedback received about an applicant’s successful or unsuccessful grant is often unclear and generic. 56.98% of survey respondents said they had not received the feedback needed to better understand the reason for the outcome and/or to improve future applications. There is concern that ‘unfunded excellence’ or ‘there is not enough money’ is often tabled as the reason for unsuccessful grants. Grant applicants want concrete information about why they were not funded.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	26.74%	23
No	56.98%	49
N/A	20.93%	18
Any comments and/or specific examples you would like to add		34
	Answered	86
	Skipped	0



Commentary:

“Completely hands off feedback - too much protection of staff, this can be humiliating given Create NSW is the most demanding grant app form in the country (have been working for decades in perf arts).”

“In the past feedback was clearer but now the main feedback is that there isn't enough money to fund all eligible projects.”

“Reasonable feedback, but when asking deeper questions around process and communication the individual staff could not provide any guidance - often ‘someone else's’ department.”

“I have mostly received clear feedback for grant results, appropriate is contentious. I have on several occasions, when requesting feedback for successful or unsuccessful grants, been told that an assessor/board member didn't think my work was 'very good' - ironically, these people assessing the application had never seen the work. The process by which board members have recently been appointed to Create NSW artform boards, at the discretion of chairs appointed by the minister, has resulted in inappropriate appointments of people who are not deeply engaged in the sector and lack the adequate expertise to appropriately assess the quality and impact of artists' work. (NB this isn't the case for every appointment, and some boards are stronger than others, but this is also because the chairs of strong boards are stronger appointments - the Minister shouldn't be the person to hand-pick Chairs, and Chairs shouldn't be given executive powers to make decisions that impact the sector largely).”

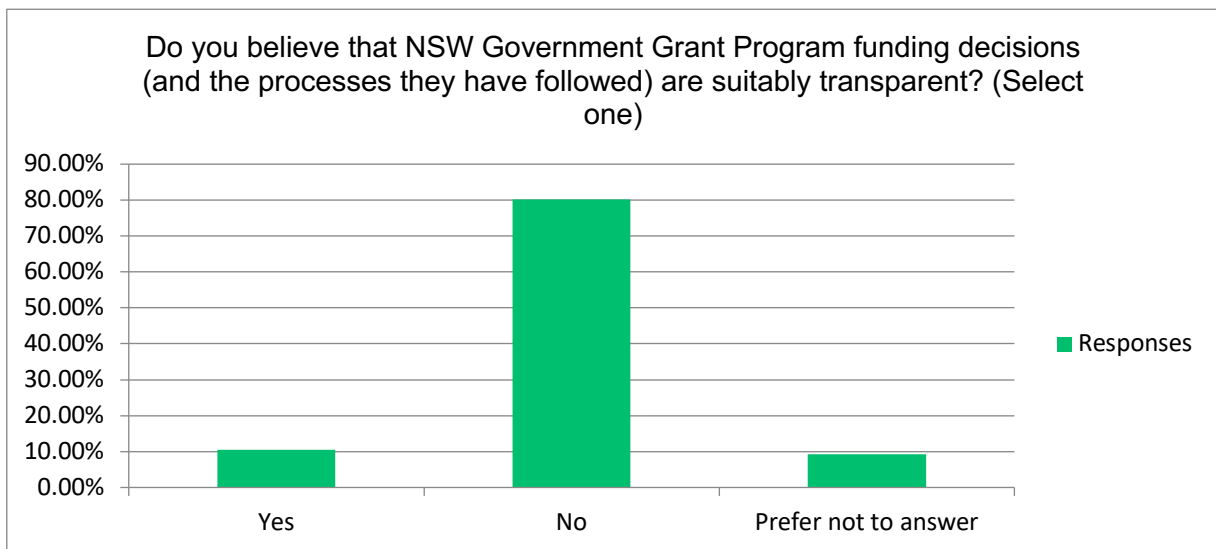
“The rounds are so competitive that feedback can be disheartening to hear you scored well but others scored better. It makes you wonder if politics are at play rather than your application detail.”

“Feedback basically ‘too many applicants of excellence, not enough funds to give out.’”

3. Do you believe that NSW Government Grant Program funding decisions (and the processes they have followed) are suitably transparent?

There is overwhelming concern amongst the sector about funding decisions. 80.23% of respondents believe that current decision-making processes are not transparent. The key issue raised was political interference and Ministerial oversight, which raises concerns about the viability of the peer assessment process. Peer assessment is the main process for assessing and allocating funding in the Arts; and peer assessors are normally artists and arts workers with relevant industry knowledge. Other issues mentioned include: a lack of diversity on Artform Panels; a Sydney metro bias; and a lack of transparency with budget allocations.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	10.47%	9
No	80.23%	69
Prefer not to answer	9.30%	8
Any comments and/or specific examples you would like to add		36
	Answered	86
	Skipped	0



Commentary:

“Regional applicants are not considered in the same light as metropolitan applicants. This is clearly evident by both the number and value of successful regional applications compared to metro.”

“I trust the peers on the panels but I do not trust what happens when their recommendations are sent to the Minister. He is known to change decisions to suit his own agenda.”

“We have concerns that applicants are allowed to sit on decision making panels (albeit they absent themselves); we have concerns that there is often no clarity around the quantum of funds on offer and that the Minister’s discretion is frequently used by the current Minister; that panel recommendations are regularly overturned by the Minister and that more applicants are approved than funds allow.”

“To be honest I think the team at Create NSW are trying and would like to run a transparent process but they are hampered by bureaucracy and a change of leadership at the ministry level.”

“Artform boards are a problem. How do you equitably divide the money between artforms? Whose choice is that? When boards are now only looking a small fraction of the overall, where is the big picture of the entire ecology? I can't stress how BAD the communication is. And how incredibly frustrating. We feel undervalued.”

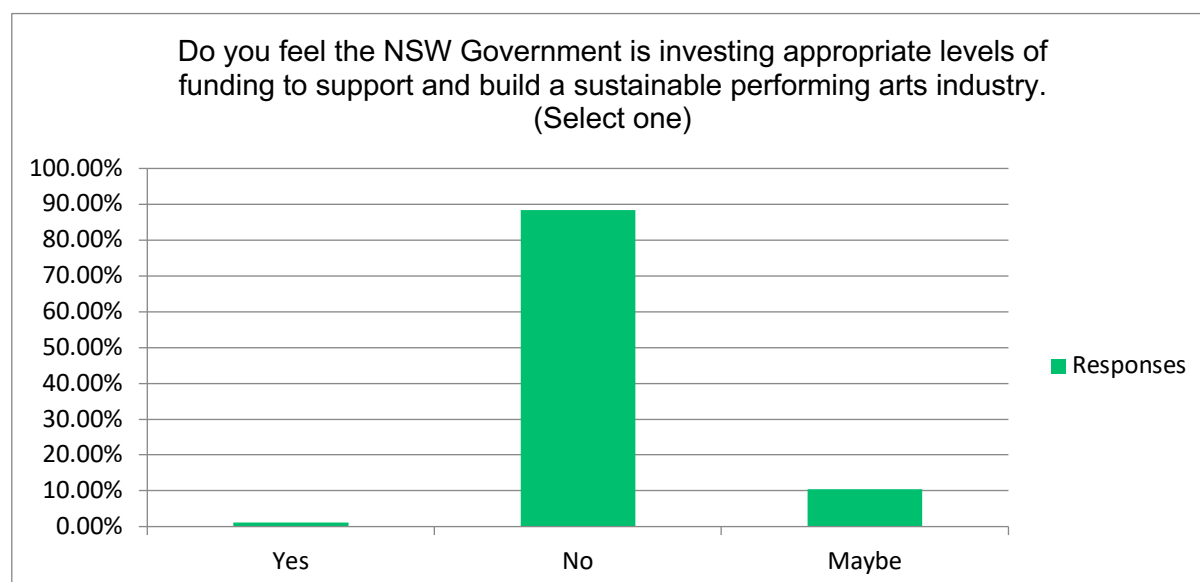
“The process for appointments is not appropriate and does not take into account the ecologies within the different artform sectors and their intersections. For years it has been nearly impossible to find results for funding outcomes, this is improving. Transparency is getting better; however fairness is not.”

“There feels like a three way gap: The Create NSW staff, the Board that makes the decisions and the Minister that signs off on it. Each strata of this process seems to have different understandings and processes. There have been some classic examples of the Minister overriding the decisions of the Board. And it feels like Create NSW is under resourced to deliver its vision. What would it take to properly fund the creative sector in NSW?”

4. Do you feel the NSW Government is investing appropriate levels of funding to support and build a sustainable performing arts industry?

Lack of appropriate funding for the Arts in NSW is regarded as a major issue. 88.10% of the survey respondents did not believe that the NSW State Government invested appropriately in the Arts. There is a direct correlation between low levels of funding and artists moving interstate, high levels of burn out and mental health issues, and the competitiveness of funding in NSW. This is particularly true for independent artists and the small to medium sector.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	1.16%	1
No	88.37%	76
Maybe	10.47%	9
Any comments and/or specific examples you would like to add		36
	Answered	86
	Skipped	0



Commentary:

“There is simply nowhere near enough funds to support small companies and independent artists, although panel processes may be thorough, the amount funded is nowhere close to enough to support a healthy ecosystem. The funding is, rather, geared to institutions and infrastructure. While important this does not encourage the development nor presentation of new work and does not contribute enough to the income of local artists and arts workers. This means NSW artists work interstate to earn a living and undermines the level of quality of NSW product. In turn that means continual importing of productions from elsewhere.”

“Too much emphasis on major performing arts. Inadequate resources for contemporary practice including Independents, small to medium sector, regional and youth arts as well as mid-career and senior artists.”

“There is no way near enough funding for the arts - across all levels of government. Very concerned at the lack of funding of service orgs.”

“Multiple portfolio changes and reviews have occurred for both Create NSW and the sector in general. Despite the level of contribution of the sector to the economy, employment (creative Industries in particular), tourism and community health and well-being (one of the first sectors to be called upon to support disaster recovery), the performing arts sector and the arts in general are not provided the level of support of other sectors.”

“There is support, but arts workers often subsidise their own practice (by credit card debt!) to make their own work. This ultimately benefits the society, but possibly not the artist! Too little resource spread too thin, means support is patchy at best, and sometimes lacks continuity.”

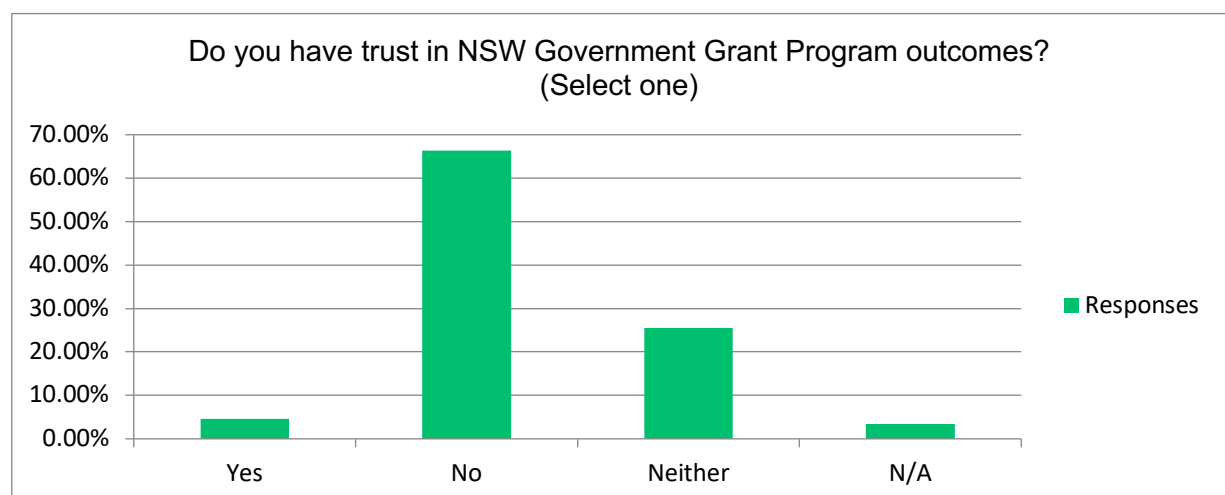
“More funds should be invested in smaller organisations and independents who are the backbone. In addition, real diversity means standing by your 'priorities' applying processes of Affirmative Action and Equity and Inclusion. Consultation with the sector.”

“Funding levels have not changed since 2016. NSW defers any reference to disability to NDIS and Federal funding, ignoring the crucial role that state based organisations play in supporting NSW artist and artworkers with disability.”

5. Do you have trust in NSW Government Grant Program outcomes?

This question highlighted that there is a significant lack of trust in State Government Funding Programs. In response to this question 66.67% said they did not trust State Government Grant Programs; while only 4.6% said they did.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	4.65%	4
No	66.28%	57
Neither	25.58%	22
N/A	3.49%	3
Any comments and/or specific examples you would like to add		31
	Answered	86
	Skipped	0



Commentary:

"The Art form boards are biased toward metro based organisations and artists. 'Known' artist are often provided grants because they have delivered successful projects in the past, not necessarily because the application has more merit than another. Regional artists and organisations are not considered as professional or having the capacity to deliver."

"It's like a lottery."

"Not always. I am involved with some companies who are consistently funded, and others - individual artists, mostly - who can't seem to get a look-in. Clearer guidelines and a broader group of assessors might shift this."

"There has been recent interference by government. I think many artists are frightened to speak up about this - feels completely undemocratic. Saying that, this year is an improvement. Staff communications MUCH BETTER in 2020, much friendlier and their emails are on the website AT LAST after being hands off and mysterious for a very long time."

"As mentioned, political interference in the assessment process. A lot of work goes into applying and assessing, to then have Ministers play favourites and impose political priorities is very poor form."

"If you analyse the successfuls so far, there is very limited resources that go to service organisations, capacity building projects, community engagement. There is little understanding of how regional NSW works. In some boards, while there have been successful regional applications, they have been funded at a much lower rate."

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. This comes down to inadequate funds to start with, and sketchy assessment processes due to favouritism of board appointments as previously mentioned. When strategies are developed in consultation with key stakeholders in certain subsectors, impacts are greater and outcomes are more trustworthy (for example previous Western Sydney strategies including Making Spaces, Emerging Organisations and Strategic Partnerships) - when government works with the sector, which is incredibly well networked and collegiate, to identify areas of need and provide adequate support to those areas, things start to shift - this is a rare occurrence."

"I trust organisations who receive funding, but I don't trust the equity and transparency of the funding process. I've been successful in receiving funding in the past not just because of the merit of my work, but because of my education and because English is my first language. Not everyone has these advantages."

6. Do you have any additional comments or examples you wish to add?

There were 41 additional comments provided by participants in response to Question 6 which further support and exemplify sentiments found in the previous responses. Below is a selection:

"The lack of transparency in the pot means that far too many applications are being laboured over for a pool of money that is too small. The hours of labour to write an application is too much to be wasted. Burn out in the industry is real and not necessary."

“When funding outcomes are held up for long periods of time after the release dates it is very unsettling. Many years these grants have been late even to the degree in which projects are cancelled or postponed that have been advertised. There is no reason for this disorganisation.”

“Indicative of the problem, the recent revelations that the Regional Cultural Fund did not support the top ranked applications after an exhaustive and thorough assessment process of almost 200 applications and to then have one of the key Ministers involved note that we can't leave these decisions just to the 'artsy crowd' was frankly insulting.”

“To have every art form board have a member of the Opera House skews the outcomes towards the Sydney status quo. I do not know how to compete - when I am standing so far away from anything they measure! Or let alone see! Or let alone can imagine because urban environments are not my 'centre' or 'apex' of achievement.”

“Funding is also a statement of investment. The arts give a huge amount to the economy and sense of collective and cultural well-being in NSW. It needs investment to match.”

“Recently sought in-depth accountability on funding decision from one of the Boards. No CaLD representative. All white panellists, all white artists selected. Panel decided to change the priorities after the deadline and gave no warning or opportunity to re-submit. They decided to choose COVID adverse projects, however after 3 weeks of work this is unacceptable to not be given a chance to address this adequately.”

“There is a lack of understanding of the stress on small organisations to meet reporting and application requirements in short time frames, only to be left hanging for weeks and months, unable to confirm staff or project contracts, as we await funding outcomes. Applications often ask for information that been provided in several different formats previously.”

“I think it is very important for the NSW government to understand the diversity of practice and audience that is within the state, instead of focusing most on our capital and major centres. There is a need for a bottom-up approach for funding that develops future audiences and makers from a young age, across all areas in NSW. There is need for a gradual shift in the representation of arts outside of metro areas, including more opportunities for access, engagement and participation.”

Most responses to Question 6 referred to themes of diversity, inclusion and investment, but one participant offered the government a strategic position that directly interfaces with the networked and collegiate nature of the sector and would ensure a closer relationship:

“When strategies are developed in consultation with key stakeholders in certain subsectors, impacts are greater and outcomes are more trustworthy (for example previous Western Sydney strategies including Making Spaces, Emerging Organisations and Strategic Partnerships) - when government works with the sector, which is incredibly well networked and collegiate, to identify areas of need and provide adequate support to those areas, things start to shift - this is a rare occurrence.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the qualitative feedback provided by participants denotes a strong disconnection between artists and arts workers and the government in terms of expectations around funding support for the Arts, and a lack of direction towards the development of the Arts sector in New South Wales.

The survey provides a succinct snapshot of an Arts sector that is frustrated by a lack of investment which has polarised the small to medium sectors and regional areas. The sector is also stymied by the bureaucratic nature of funding processes and lack of transparency, which directly affects efficacy. Participants indicated a strong lack of trust in the processes employed by the Government when distributing funds to artists, and it is the perception of Ministerial influence and the lack of feedback to artists that poses the biggest threat to integrity.

There is widespread misconceptions about the decision making process and a deep misunderstanding between the sector and the Department. This poses challenges when assessing whether or not the current process is functioning properly. Respondents often speak of Ministerial influence or intrusion without awareness that art form boards provide advice and guidance to the decision making process but are not authorised to make decisions.

The outcomes of the survey suggest that the NSW government needs to take a more hands-on approach and consult directly with the Arts sector to determine priority areas and put in place processes which are transparent and accountable, utilising the expert peer-assessment panels to provide more constructive feedback on applications. Additionally, it is observed that there needs to be a clearer demarcation between the peer-review and decision-making process of the different arts panels and the approval process of the Ministry.

Signed,

Theatre Network NSW – tnn.org.au

Regional Arts NSW – regionalartsnsw.com.au

MusicNSW – musicnsw.com

Ausdance NSW - ausdancensw.com.au