
PEOPLE, PLACES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Insights Report from the
VAPAC Arts Leaders Summit 2026

Leadership Priorities for
Victoria's Performing Arts Sector



**The Memo, Healesville
17-18 March 2026**

Prepared for the Victorian Association
of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)

Acknowledgements

The Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres

The peak body representing performing arts venues and theatre professionals across Victoria and Tasmania.

The Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres plays a key role in developing and maintaining a vibrant and sustainable performing arts sector.

The Traditional Owners

VAPAC acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands where we live and work and upon which our member venues are situated throughout Victoria and beyond. We pay our respects to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present.

Our members and those who contributed to the Summit

VAPAC acknowledges the contribution of all participants, presenters, facilitators and sector leaders who generously contributed their experience, insights and ideas throughout the Summit.

Their willingness to engage openly and constructively has informed the observations and recommendations contained within this report.

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Executive Summary

The 2026 VAPAC Arts Leaders Summit brought together representatives from performing arts centres, cultural venues, local Councils and government agencies, producing organisations and sector partners from across Victoria.

The Summit occurred at a pivotal moment for the sector. While the immediate impacts of the pandemic have receded, participants recognised that Victoria's performing arts ecosystem is now navigating a period of structural adjustment characterised by rising operating costs, workforce shortages, changing audience behaviors, infrastructure pressures and increasing expectations of impact, accountability and inclusion.

Across two days of discussion, participants demonstrated a strong commitment to collaboration, candid conversation and practical action. While presenting and programming organisations face different local circumstances, a common theme emerged across every session: the future sustainability of Victoria's performing arts sector requires a radical reset with opportunity across three interconnected foundations - **People, Places and Partnerships**.

People represent the workforce, leadership capability, governance capacity and talent pipeline required to sustain the sector.

Places represent the venues, cultural infrastructure and civic assets that connect communities with arts and culture across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

Partnerships represent the collaborative relationships between venues, artists, governments, educators, communities and industry partners that will be essential to future sustainability.

The Summit highlighted five overarching priorities:

- Workforce sustainability and technical skills development
- Stronger regional and metropolitan collaboration
- Investment in leadership and governance capability
- More effective and coordinated advocacy
- Recognition of performing arts centres as essential civic and cultural infrastructure

The Summit concluded with a clear call for collective action. The future health of Victoria's performing arts ecosystem will depend less on organisational growth and more on collaboration, shared leadership and long-term sustainability.

Introduction

The Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC) convened the 2026 Arts Leaders Summit at The Memo, Healesville on 17–18 March 2026, bringing together more than fifty leaders from across Victoria's performing arts ecosystem.

The Summit was intentionally designed as a member-only gathering to create a trusted environment for honest conversation, peer learning and collaborative problem solving. The Summit sought to create space for sector-wide reflection on the challenges and opportunities facing performing arts centres and cultural venues across the state.

The program combined keynote presentations, facilitated discussions, policy briefings and strategy laboratories focused on workforce development, governance, regional collaboration and advocacy.

Importantly, the Summit was not designed simply to identify challenges. Its purpose was to explore practical responses and establish a leadership agenda for the sector.

The findings in this report are drawn from:

- Summit presentations and keynote addresses;
- Facilitated plenary discussions;
- Participant contributions and sector conversations;
- Strategy laboratory outputs;
- Written notes and transcripts from all sessions;
- Observations and synthesis undertaken by the Summit facilitators.

The Summit operated in the spirit of Chatham House principles. Individual comments have been synthesised into thematic observations and recommendations rather than attributed to specific participants.

This report does not seek to represent every view expressed during the Summit. Rather, it identifies the key themes, challenges and opportunities that emerged consistently across discussions, and which collectively represent areas of strategic importance to Victoria's performing arts sector.

A Sector in Structural Adjustment

A defining contribution to the Summit was the opening framing provided by VAPAC Executive Director Melenie Stevenson, who described the current environment as one of structural adjustment rather than recovery.

Participants strongly supported this assessment.

The sector is no longer focused on returning to pre-pandemic conditions. Instead, leaders are confronting deeper structural questions about sustainability, workforce capacity, organisational scale, infrastructure investment and public value.

Participants identified several converging pressures:

- Rising operating and production costs;
- Increasing compliance requirements;
- Workforce shortages and burnout;
- Shifting audience behaviours;
- Ageing infrastructure;
- Growing regional inequities;
- Constrained government investment.

At the same time, expectations continue to grow. Organisations are expected to deliver artistic excellence, community engagement, inclusion, First Nations leadership, education outcomes, economic impact and financial resilience, often with limited additional resources.

This environment is forcing organisations to reconsider long-held assumptions about growth, scale and sustainability.

The challenge facing leaders is not simply how to do more with less. Rather, it is how to redesign organisations and systems to remain sustainable in a fundamentally changed operating environment.

PEOPLE

Workforce Sustainability

The most urgent issue raised throughout the Summit was workforce sustainability.

Discussions revealed a growing consensus that the sector is experiencing a significant skills crisis, particularly in technical and production roles.

"We're not facing a staffing shortage. We're facing a skills crisis."

"We cannot build sustainable organisations on unsustainable people."

Participants described:

- Difficulties recruiting experienced technicians;
- Increasing competition from other industries;
- Leadership fatigue;
- Succession planning challenges;
- Growing safety risks associated with workforce shortages.

The technical workforce session highlighted that these challenges are no longer isolated staffing issues. They represent a systemic threat to the sector's ability to safely deliver artistic activity.

Several participants observed that experienced practitioners continue to leave the sector for industries offering greater financial stability and more predictable working conditions. At the same time, fewer young people are entering technical production pathways.

The result is a widening gap between workforce demand and workforce capacity.

The Summit identified an urgent need for new training pathways, stronger partnerships with educational institutions and a more coordinated statewide approach to workforce development.

Leadership and Talent

Leadership development emerged as a second critical workforce issue.

The Summit recognised that leadership roles within performing arts centres have become increasingly complex. Leaders are expected to balance artistic ambition, financial sustainability, workforce wellbeing, governance responsibilities and community expectations simultaneously.

Participants discussed the importance of developing leaders who possess both specialist expertise and broad organisational capability.

There was widespread recognition that leadership succession cannot be left to chance.

Future leaders require structured opportunities to develop governance literacy, financial capability, advocacy skills and strategic thinking.

The sector's future success will depend upon its ability to identify, support and develop the next generation of cultural leaders.

Governance Capability

The governance session reinforced the importance of boards as active contributors to organisational success.

A recurring theme was the growing dominance of compliance within governance conversations.

While compliance and risk management remain essential, participants expressed concern that these responsibilities often crowd out strategic discussion and advocacy.

The Governance Triad framework suggested - Strategy, Advocacy and Compliance, provided a useful lens through which to reconsider governance practice.

The Summit highlighted a need for stronger induction, evaluation and capability development processes for board members across the sector.

Good governance was consistently described not simply as oversight, but as an active contributor to organisational flourishing.

PLACES

Cultural Infrastructure

The Summit repeatedly returned to the importance of cultural infrastructure.

“Regional venues are not peripheral to Victoria’s cultural ecology. They are essential infrastructure.”

Participants recognised that performing arts centres are more than venues. They are civic assets, community gathering places and cultural anchors.

However, concerns were raised regarding the sustainability of existing infrastructure.

Many venues face increasing maintenance costs, ageing facilities and growing compliance requirements.

Participants noted a significant gap in current funding arrangements. While investment often focuses on artistic activity, limited mechanisms exist to support ongoing infrastructure renewal and maintenance.

The Summit identified a strong need for advocacy around infrastructure investment and asset renewal.

Regional Victoria as a Strategic Asset

Regional Victoria emerged as one of the sector’s greatest strengths.

Discussions highlighted the significant role regional venues play in delivering cultural experiences, supporting local artists and building community connection.

At the same time, regional organisations face unique challenges, including workforce attraction, touring logistics and access to resources.

Participants discussed that regional infrastructure should not be viewed as peripheral to Victoria’s cultural ecosystem but as central to its future success.

The Summit recognised that the strength of the Victorian performing arts sector depends on a healthy relationship between metropolitan and regional communities.

Sustainable Scale

A notable theme across the Summit was a shift away from growth as the primary measure of success.

“The conversation shouldn’t only be about funding the art. We also need to invest in the systems that allow the art to reach communities.”

Instead, participants increasingly spoke about sustainable scale.

This reflects an emerging understanding that organisational resilience may require different approaches to programming, staffing and resource allocation.

The conversation suggested a growing willingness across the sector to prioritise sustainability and impact over volume alone.

Participants acknowledged that future success may involve making difficult choices regarding organisational focus, priorities and capacity.

PARTNERSHIPS

Regional–Metro Collaboration

“Collaboration can no longer be something we celebrate. It has to become part of how we operate.”

One of the most practical and inspiring discussions focused on regional touring partnerships.

Examples from Portland, Hamilton and Warrnambool demonstrated how collaborative programming and shared planning can reduce costs, improve touring viability and strengthen audience outcomes.

Participants highlighted how regional consortia are already creating more efficient touring circuits, reducing environmental impacts and improving value for both producers and presenters.

These examples illustrate the potential benefits of moving from transactional relationships to strategic partnerships.

The challenge now is scaling these models and supporting their adoption across other regions of Victoria.

Government Relationships

The Creative Victoria session generated significant discussion about the relationship between policy development and sector implementation.

Participants welcomed many aspects of Creative State 2028, particularly its emphasis on regional communities, young people and workforce development.

However, concerns emerged regarding consultation processes, transparency and the connection between strategy and implementation.

There was strong support for more meaningful and ongoing engagement between government and the sector.

Participants expressed a desire for greater clarity around outcomes, measures of success and opportunities for collaborative policy development.

The Summit reinforced the importance of maintaining constructive but candid relationships between government and the performing arts sector.

Collective Advocacy

“Collectively, we are one of Victoria’s largest cultural networks. We need to tell that story together.”

The Advocacy Strategy Lab highlighted the need for a more coordinated sector voice.

Participants discussed that advocacy should extend beyond arts funding discussions and position performing arts centres as contributors to broader public outcomes including:

- Education;
- Health and wellbeing;
- Regional development;
- Tourism;
- Workforce participation;
- Social cohesion.

There was widespread recognition that the sector's value proposition must be articulated across government portfolios rather than solely within arts funding frameworks.

The discussion also highlighted the potential value of developing a collective impact framework capable of demonstrating the combined contribution of the performing arts sector across Victoria.

Leadership Priorities

The Summit identified five priority areas for sector leadership over the next three years.

1. Workforce Development

Building sustainable workforce pathways and addressing technical skills shortages.

2. Infrastructure Sustainability

Advocating for investment in cultural infrastructure and asset renewal.

3. Leadership and Governance

Strengthening capability across boards, executives and emerging leaders.

4. Collaboration

Supporting regional partnerships, shared services and collaborative touring models.

5. Collective Advocacy

Developing a stronger and more coordinated narrative around the value of performing arts centres.

The Summit endorsed the exploration of the following key actions:

1. Develop a Victorian Performing Arts Workforce Strategy.
2. Establish a statewide technical skills and workforce database.
3. Expand partnerships with educational institutions and training providers.
4. Support regional touring and programming consortia.
5. Investigate shared employment and workforce models.
6. Develop a VAPAC Governance Toolkit.
7. Establish a Performing Arts Leadership Development Program.
8. Create a coordinated cross-portfolio advocacy strategy.
9. Advocate for an Infrastructure Renewal and Asset Maintenance Fund.
10. Develop a collective impact measurement framework for the sector.

Next Steps

Immediate Priorities

- Validate findings with members.
- Establish working groups around key priority areas.
- Develop advocacy priorities for the 2026 election cycle.
- Engage with Creative Victoria regarding emerging opportunities.

Medium-Term Priorities

- Pilot workforce and touring initiatives.
- Strengthen partnerships with training providers.
- Expand regional collaboration models.
- Develop governance and leadership capability programs.

Long-Term Priorities

- Develop a shared Victorian Performing Arts Sustainability Framework.
- Monitor workforce, infrastructure and audience indicators.
- Report progress annually to members.
- Review outcomes at future VAPAC Arts Leaders Summits.

Final Reflection

Throughout the Summit, participants demonstrated a willingness to engage honestly with the realities facing the sector.

The conversations were candid. At times they were uncomfortable. Yet they were also optimistic.

Not optimistic because challenges are diminishing, but because leaders across Victoria increasingly recognise that many of these challenges are shared.

The future of Victoria's performing arts sector will not be secured through individual organisations acting alone. It will be shaped by the collective choices made across the ecosystem.

The opportunity ahead is not simply to sustain existing models. It is to reset, rebuild a stronger, more connected and more resilient sector.

A sector that invests in its people.

A sector that values and sustains its places.

A sector that understands the power of partnerships.

These are the foundations upon which the next chapter of Victoria's performing arts story will be built.

Appendices

Appendix A

Arts Leaders Summit Program

VAPAC 2026

Arts Leaders Summit

Tue 17th Mar 9am - 6pm
Wed 18th Mar 9am - 1pm
The Memo Healesville

About the Arts Leaders Summit



There has never been a more critical time for Victoria's performing arts sector to align. As we navigate systemic challenges—from constrained funding to shifting audience behaviors—this Summit marks a strategic evolution toward a high-level, collegiate mandate.

Victorian Association of
Performing Arts Centres
www.vapac.org.au

Registered # A0005511W
ABN: 82 578 774 451

Over the next 1.5 days at The Memo, we will move beyond problem identification to active solution-building. Our goal is to establish the strategic priorities and points of leverage required to advocate for the Victorian Creative Industries in 2026.

VAPAC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live and work and upon which our member venues are situated across Victoria. We pay our respects to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present, they are the original creators and storytellers. Always was, always will be.

This year's collaborative format includes:

- Facilitated Strategy: Gaining clarity on our current environment through peer and external voices.
- Solution-Building: Working groups tasked with workshopping tangible solutions to our most pressing issues.
- A Unified Mandate: Defining the collective leadership intent for the year ahead.

Thank you to Yarra Ranges Council for hosting us at The Memo Healesville, industry partners and contributors for their essential expertise in shaping this event.

Most importantly, thank you to our members; your perspective is the foundation of this roadmap. We are no longer just reacting to change—we are defining how we navigate it.

**Please note, the following agenda is subject to change.*

Speakers, Presenters & Facilitators



Penny Miles, Thinker in Residence

Penny Miles is a Senior Associate with one of Australia's leading arts consultancies, where she works with governments and major cultural organisations on strategy, policy design and investment frameworks. She is also Executive Director of the Betty Amsden Foundation and a Board Director of BlakDance. With close to 30 years' experience across the creative industries, government and philanthropy, Penny has held senior roles at state and federal level as well as in statutory agencies and cultural institutions. She specialises in public investment, cultural policy, sector sustainability and governance, and is a trusted advisor on complex decisions shaping the future of the arts and cultural sector.



Tony Grybowski

Tony Grybowski is a senior arts executive, governance specialist and strategic advisor with more than 35 years' experience across Australia's cultural sector. He is the founder of *Tony Grybowski & Associates*, advising governments, boards and arts organisations on strategy, governance, organisational performance and cultural policy. Tony has worked with many local governments, performing arts venues and other arts and cultural institutions. Tony previously served as CEO of the *Australia Council for the Arts*, where he led major national policy and funding reforms and oversaw a \$220 million annual investment in the sector. Today he works with arts organisations across Australia on strategic planning, governance reviews and organisational development. Tony currently serves on the boards of the *Melbourne Symphony Orchestra* and *SAE University College*.



Andrew Abbott

Andrew Abbott is a Principal at *Korn Ferry* specialising in executive search across government, education and the not for profit sector, with a particular focus on cultural and public institutions. Andrew began his career in the arts sector before spending more than twenty years in senior roles in the Victorian Government, including as Deputy Secretary for Creative, Sport and Visitor Economies and Chief Executive of Creative Victoria. Across his career he has worked closely with many of Australia's leading cultural organisations on policy, funding, and institutional development. Today he advises boards and senior leaders on leadership and talent, supporting organisations to appoint executives who can lead through complexity and deliver strong outcomes for communities. Andrew holds an MBA from Melbourne Business School, is an Executive Fellow of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government and is a Fellow of IPAA Victoria.

Day 1 / The Reality

Tuesday 17th March, 2026

8.30am Arrival and Registrations

9.00am Acknowledgement of Country

9.10am Update from VAPAC's Chair, Tammy Ryan

9.15am Welcome & Sector Framing by Melenie Stevenson

9.30am Opening Conversation

The Victorian Reality: What We're Not Saying

We spend much of our time advocating for the sector through advocacy, success stories and impact reports. However, beneath the public narrative sits a layer of truth about the real conditions shaping arts leadership in Victoria. This session invites everyone to speak candidly, as peers, about the structural challenges, tensions and compromises shaping arts leadership in Victoria today.

Speakers:

Danny Delahunty, Creative Director and CEO, Melbourne Fringe

Virginia Winter, Performing Arts Program Coordinator, Portland Arts Centre

Moderated by Penny Miles, the official Arts Leaders Summit Thinker in Residence

10.30am Morning Tea Break

11.00am Industry Update

The 2026 Policy Roadmap

Creative Victoria outlines Victorian Government's current priorities for the sector, based on strategic plans over the next 12 months. This session provides members with an exclusive inside perspective on what these priorities mean for strategic growth and specific avenues for member involvement.

Speakers:

Zack Buchanan, A/ Director, Policy and Industry Development, Creative Victoria

Zac Gillam Manager, Policy and Insights, Creative Victoria

12.30pm Lunch Break

1.15pm

The Leaders Lab

Governance in The Arts: The Art of Governance

Governance in the arts and cultural sector is under increasing scrutiny - from funders, regulators, communities and artists themselves. At the same time, organisations are navigating constrained resources, heightened compliance obligations, and the ongoing challenge of protecting and championing artistic voice.

For more than 30 years, **Tony Grybowski** has worked alongside arts and cultural boards, CEOs and Chairs across Australia - as an executive, board member and consultant. One consistent theme emerges: *Good governance is not about more rules - it's about clarity, trust and alignment.*

The Governance

The 60-minute session will explore specific leadership perspective:

1 / CEOs of arts and cultural organisations

Navigating board relationships, accountability, and artistic leadership

2 / Board Members

Understanding role, responsibility, risk and strategic oversight

3 / Chairs and Deputy Chairs

Leading effective boards, supporting CEOs, and stewarding culture

What to Expect

- A short provocation drawing on real-world governance experience
- Confidential, peer-based discussion with colleagues from across the sector
- Space to test ideas, raise challenges, and learn from others
- A practical *What do I do next?* guide provided after the session

2.30pm

Afternoon Tea Break

2.50pm

Special Guest Presentation

Leadership and Talent in Performing Arts Centres: Reflections from Government and Executive Search

Drawing on his experience as former CEO of Creative Victoria and now as an executive search consultant working across the cultural and public sectors, Andrew will share reflections on leadership, organisational capability and talent in performing arts centres. The session will explore the evolving expectations of cultural institutions, what he is seeing in leadership appointments across the sector, and how organisations can attract and support the people needed to deliver their mission.

*Presented by **Andrew Abbott**, Principal - Government, Education and Not for Profit at Korn Ferry.*

3.50pm

Proof of Concept

Technical Workforce & Safety: From Insights to Action

Using the recent Technical Workforce and Safety Insights Report as a live case study, this panel moves beyond the data to demonstrate the power of collective VAPAC initiatives. The panel explores how these cross-sector insights—developed in collaboration with the PAPA group and our Industry Development Initiative—provide the necessary roadmap for addressing technical workforce sustainability and safety standards across the state. This is an exclusive opportunity for leaders to examine the report's recommendations and discuss how similar solution-oriented frameworks can be applied to the broader challenges we will tackle throughout this Summit.

Speakers:

Murray Johnstone, Senior Manager, Technical Training & Development and CEO, VACT Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Arts Centre Melbourne

Emily O'Brien, Director, Elucidate consulting

Bronwyn Coulston, Stakeholder Engagement Manager – Arts, Service & Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA)

Moderated by Penny Miles, the official Arts Leaders Summit Thinker in Residence

4.50pm

Venue Tour

Discovering The Memo Healesville

This is an opportunity to explore one of regional Victoria's most significant cultural assets. We will look at how the venue balances heritage architecture with contemporary performance needs—a practical case study in the shared infrastructure models discussed today.

6.00pm

Member Reception at the Healesville Hotel

Day 2 / Creating The Roadmap

Wednesday 18th March, 2026

8.30am Coffee & Reconnection

9.00am The Catalyst
Strategic Decisions Victorian Arts Leaders Can't Avoid by 2028

A sharp, punchy opening to the day designed to frame the upcoming strategy work. Penny Miles (thinker in residence) will challenge leaders with critical choices facing the sector.

9.20am Strategy Labs
Collaborative Action

Delegates are invited to attend one of the below group sessions. Each group will move past theory to produce three practical sector-level actions and three organisation-level actions based on the lab topic.

Lab 1: Regional-Metro Partnership Models

Address the geographic equity by building sustainable, reciprocal models for partnership between metro and regional Victorian hubs.

Lab 2: Workforce & Talent Pipeline Strategy

Focus on how we build and sustain the workforce of the future, from early-career pathways and leadership succession to staff retention.

Lab 3: Collective Advocacy Strategy

Finalise the leadership mandate for 2026 and identifying the points of leverage required to influence policy and funding.

10.40am Morning Tea Break

11.00am **Unified Intent**
Defining Our Collective Path

Our final session marks the transition from strategy to mandate. Outcomes from each of the Strategy Labs will be discussed with the full delegation, summarising high-priority actions for both the sector and members.

Rather than a passive summary, this is a whole-group opportunity to pressure-test the proposed solutions and ensure alignment across the state. By synthesising the outputs from Partnerships, Workforce and Advocacy, we'll finalise the leadership mandate for 2026—establishing a unified, actionable roadmap for the Victorian performing arts economy.

Moderated by Penny Miles, the official Arts Leaders Summit Thinker in Residence

12.00pm **Wrap up & Reflection**

Summit closing by Penny Miles.

VAPAC Events Calendar:

Showcase Victoria

Tue 12th - Wed 13th May

The Clocktower

Technical Managers Network Conference & Tradeshow

Mon 15th - Tue 16th June

Meat Market

Marketing & Ticketing Network Conference

Tue 28th - Wed 29th July

Frankston Arts Centre
