



## Supporting the Australian Neo-Bush Festival Scene: Doof Culture as Social Infrastructure

By Maddison Norton, Norton Research Consulting (2026)

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This whitepaper addresses festival organisers; public arts and cultural agencies; local government and regulatory authorities; industry peak bodies; regional development and community wellbeing practitioners; and researchers. It interprets a sub-genre of contemporary music festivals, “neo-bush festivals”, through a social capital lens, to support a clearer understanding of their social and cultural value.

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### 1. Executive Summary

Music festivals make a recognised economic contribution to Australian society, particularly through their role in the live music ecosystem (Creative Australia, 2024) and regional economies (e.g. [see article by Armidale Regional Council, 2025](#)). Festivals also have broader social and cultural impacts that are widely acknowledged but far less documented or researched.

In recent years, festivals have faced increasing pressures. Creative Australia’s [Soundcheck report](#) shows that only **56%** of festivals in 2022–23 reported a profit, with many citing rising costs, lack of funding support, and insurance barriers as major challenges (Creative

Australia, 2024). Demonstrating the full contribution that festivals make to society is an essential step in attracting funding and maintaining community and government support for the sector. While organisations such as Creative Australia and Live Music Australia have worked to demonstrate the economic value of festivals, economic analysis represents only one dimension of their value.

To address the need for deeper understanding of the social and cultural value of music festivals, this whitepaper reports on a community consultation with long-term participants in a specific sub-genre of Australian festivals: **neo-bush festivals**. Emerging from music subcultures in the 1990s, these events have evolved into established gatherings typically held in regional and rural Australia. They are characterised by strong community participation, creative expression, connection to nature, and shared cultural values, bringing together organisers, artists, volunteers and audiences in collaborative ways that extend far beyond performance and entertainment.

The consultation, conducted by **Norton Research Consulting** in 2024 and 2025, gathered qualitative insights from **153** people involved in the neo-bush festival scene. An anonymous online survey invited participants to reflect on how they became involved and what participation has meant in their lives. Respondents included promoters, artists, volunteers, and long-term patrons. Their narratives described being drawn to these events in search of something different from mainstream social spaces, and spoke of finding acceptance, community, creative expression, and shared values. Many highlighted the role these gatherings have played in shaping their identity and social networks.

This whitepaper proposes that neo-bush festivals may function as essential **social infrastructure** in Australia. Interpreted through a **social capital** lens, the findings show that these events strengthen social networks, connect diverse groups, and support pathways into creative and economic participation. In doing so, they foster trust, shared values, and collective capacity that enable resilient and connected communities.

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## 2. Introduction

Music festivals form a significant part of Australia's live music landscape, contributing to employment, tourism, and economic activity, particularly in regional areas (Creative Australia, 2024; Live Performance Australia, 2024). At the same time, the festival sector is facing sustained pressure. Rising operational costs, insurance challenges, regulatory complexity and environmental risks have made events increasingly difficult to deliver. Recent research shows that many festivals are operating with reduced financial viability, with a significant proportion reporting financial losses (Creative Australia, 2024).

In response to mounting pressures on the sector, a number of research, advocacy and support initiatives have emerged. For example, the Australian Festival Association (AFA) has advocated for structural support for festivals, including securing extended funding through the [Revive Live](#) grants, contributing to legislative reform of the New South Wales Music Festivals Act, co-chairing formal government–industry forums, and making submissions to national inquiries to promote research, funding, and regulatory changes that benefit the festival sector (AFA, 2025).

At the state and federal levels, governments have introduced funding programs and initiatives intended to support live music events and festivals in response to challenges facing the sector. Grant criteria often prioritise events with established scale, visibility and industry-facing impact. For example, the [NSW Contemporary Music Festival Viability Fund](#) is directed toward existing large-scale festivals with a demonstrated track record of delivering “significant outcomes for contemporary music”. This reflects a focus on supporting the contemporary music sector, including artist development, industry visibility, and event viability. While this approach is understandable within a risk-management context, it does not recognise the broader social and cultural value of music festivals.

People who work in the industry and attend events are well aware of the value of music festivals. However, this value is not well documented in ways that inform formal policy, funding, and regulatory frameworks. Creative Australia’s *Soundcheck* report is an important step in this direction. The study provides a detailed overview of festival operations, financial conditions, and sector pressures, while also beginning to articulate the wider social contributions of music festivals in Australia. As part of the research, 51 festival organisers were consulted about the impacts of festivals. Alongside their role in supporting artists and the live music industry, organisers described festivals as spaces that foster community connection and a sense of belonging among audiences.

This whitepaper contributes to closing this documentation gap by reporting on the social and cultural value of one distinct sub-genre of Australia’s music festival landscape: **neo-bush festivals**. Emerging from Australia’s underground electronic music scene, these are multi-day camping events typically held in remote bush settings across regional and rural areas. They operate on a smaller scale than many major commercial festivals, meaning their contribution is not adequately reflected by economic indicators or industry performance metrics alone.

## 2.1 From ‘Doofs’ to Neo-Bush Festivals: A Distinct Cultural Lineage

The early 1990s marked the beginning of a distinct festival sub-culture in Australia, influenced by the UK free party movement. At that time in the UK, groups of people were

organising informal, often mobile gatherings in fields, warehouses, and other open spaces. Free parties developed in response to a growing regulation of nightlife and a broader desire for alternative cultural spaces beyond mainstream venues. These events spread by word of mouth and travelled from place to place, creating temporary communities built around electronic music and shared experience.

The ideas and practices associated with this movement travelled internationally, and in Australia, they took on a distinct local form. In bushland clearings across the country, people gathered for underground electronic music parties defined by psychedelic soundscapes, DIY production, and an explicit rejection of commercialism (St John, 2001). These early events were small, self-organised, and closely tied to alternative lifestyles, environmental values, and a spirit of experimentation (Luckman, 2003). Colloquially, these parties were termed ‘doofs’ or ‘bush doofs’.

By the late-1990s, gatherings such as Rainbow Serpent (now *Rainbow Spirit*) began to bridge the underground ‘doof’ tradition with more organised multi-day formats. Rainbow Serpent (est. 1998) became one of the first events to blend ‘doof’ culture with large-scale stages, wellness spaces, arts markets, workshops, and environmental programs (Luckman, 2003). Over time, similar festivals such as Dragon Dreaming, Mushroom Valley, Esoteric, Rabbits Eat Lettuce, and many others shaped a recognisable tradition: camping-based, community-driven, multi-arts festivals set in nature. These events share characteristics with the early ‘doof’ movement, but have evolved into a modernised, semi-commercial form.

## 2.2 Beyond entertainment

Although only a handful of scholars have studied this genre of festivals in depth, their work consistently highlights that these gatherings are **more than recreational spaces**. Ethnographic research has identified themes of belonging, identity exploration, environmental ethics, and alternative community structures (St John, 2001; Luckman, 2003). Attendees and creators formed what some researchers described as “tribes” or temporary communities, bound together by shared values and practices (St John, 2009). Cancosa and Bennett (2021) further argued that understandings of electronic music subcultures as purely hedonistic are misleading, and that for young people, these events have important social and political dimensions.

This is in contrast with media representations of ‘doofs’, which are usually negative (Cancosa & Bennet, 2021; Gibson & Pagan, 2006). Australian media reports on ‘doofs’ often feature sensationalised headlines focused on illegality, drug use and cult-like representations of festival goers, undoubtedly contributing to stigma (For example [‘Five charged with drug offences’](#), [‘Backpacker bush doofs cause tension...’](#)). While early ‘doofs’ did emerge as unregulated, alternative gatherings, and smaller unregulated events still occur, this whitepaper focuses on contemporary, established neo-bush festivals that

operate within regulatory frameworks. Today, these events are planned, permitted, and delivered with formal infrastructure, safety measures, and harm-minimisation practices in place.

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### Purpose and scope

This whitepaper draws on a **community consultation** exploring the lived experiences of people within the neo-bush festival scene to highlight the cultural importance of these events and make the case for policy attention.

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## 3. Community consultation

Between November 2024 and June 2025, **Norton Research Consulting** invited people involved in Australia's neo-bush festival scene, including organisers, artists, volunteers and long-term patrons, to share their perspectives through an open, anonymous, online survey distributed via social media networks. In total, **153 people** contributed. Responses were primarily qualitative, capturing respondents' lived experiences and reflections on their involvement in the neo-bush festival scene and what participation has meant to them.

### The survey

The survey comprised basic demographic questions, along with questions about how long respondents had been involved in the scene. The remainder of the survey consisted of open-ended questions inviting people to describe how they became involved, their early experiences, and reflect on their experiences over time. These questions were designed to elicit lived experiences and personal reflections through narrative accounts.

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### 3.1. Theoretical lens

This whitepaper draws on the concept of social capital to interpret the consultation insights and to articulate the broader community value generated by neo-bush festivals.

**Social capital** refers to the networks, relationships, shared values, and mutual support systems that enable people and communities to function well (Putnam, 2000). It has been described as the “glue” that holds communities together. When communities have strong social capital, they experience greater safety, healthier relationships, and higher levels of collective resilience (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Hall et al., 2023).

**Social infrastructure** refers to the physical and social spaces and systems where social interactions occur and where relationships can form (Australian Infrastructure Audit, 2019). Social infrastructure provides the conditions and settings where social capital can be generated and maintained. Without accessible places for people to gather, connect and collaborate (e.g., community centres, parks), the networks and trust that comprise social capital are difficult to build. Klinenberg (2018) argues that the quality and availability of social spaces help explain why some communities develop strong social ties and collective capacity while others do not.

This whitepaper positions neo-bush festivals as social infrastructure that generate social capital, and proposes that these gatherings require policy attention, regulatory support, and inclusion in cultural planning.

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## 3.2. Analysis

The consultation responses were read and synthesised using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Joffe, 2011). This involved reviewing the narratives, identifying recurring ideas and experiences through inductive (bottom-up) reasoning, and grouping them into shared themes that reflected common patterns across participant accounts. The process was repeated after key themes were identified, and relationships between themes were noted and interpreted through a social capital lens (deductive reasoning).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Respondents

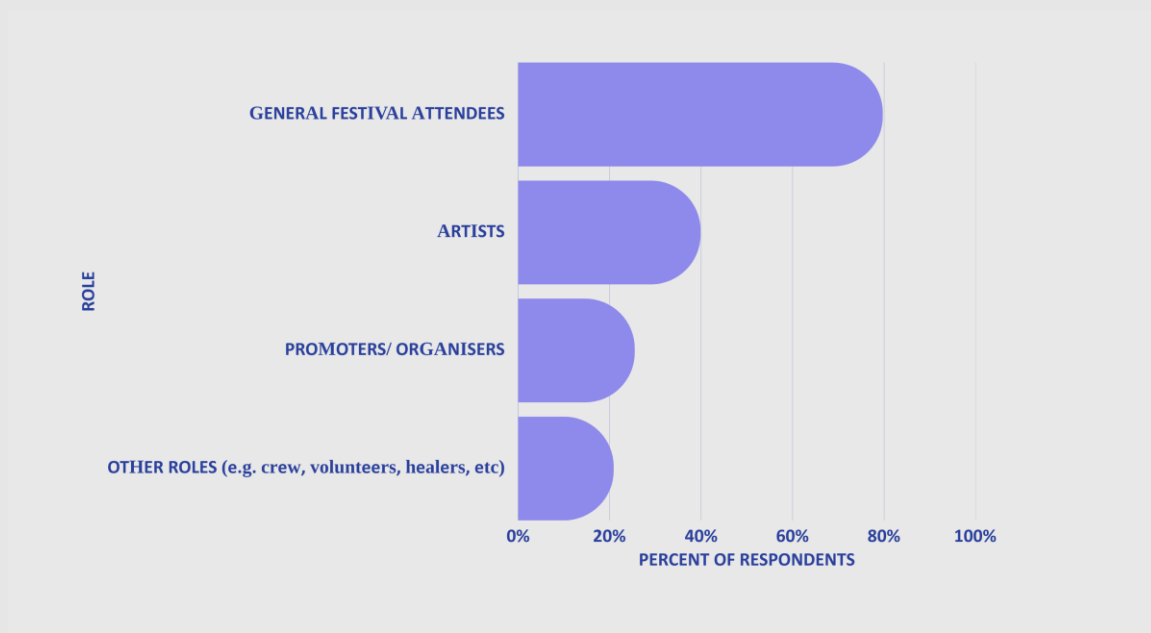
A total of **153** people responded to the survey; a snapshot of their demographic characteristics is provided below.

## People



The cohort represented people who had spent a substantial amount of time in the neo-bush festival scene. On average, respondents had over a decade of involvement (mean **12.8** years) and collectively represent more than a millennium of lived experience in the scene (**1317** years total).

## Festival Attendance



Respondents predominantly attended festivals on the east coast of Australia across VIC, NSW and QLD, and were actively attending, with **41.9%** attending **1-3** festivals per year, and **43.8%** attending **more than three** festivals per year.

### 4.2. Seeking belonging

When asked how they became involved in the scene, respondents consistently described neo-bush festivals as an alternative social world that offered acceptance, freedom, and a sense of belonging that many initially felt was missing in their personal lives. People often described being drawn in through friendships and subcultural networks, but the underlying “hook” was the opportunity to step outside everyday pressures and experience connection without judgement.

A recurring pattern was that people were drawn to the events during periods of transition: after leaving school, during early adulthood, following personal challenges, or when experiencing a lack of belonging elsewhere.

“As someone that felt like a bit of an outsider most of my teen life, this was a chance to be a part of something.”

“I had been seeking a deeper sense of community and wanted to experience a new style of festival.”

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### 4.3. What festivals *provide* in practice: wellbeing, identity, and supportive relationships

A striking theme was the extent to which contributors described neo-bush festivals as **protective** and **restorative** spaces. Many linked participation to improved mental health, personal growth, and a stronger sense of self. One contributor wrote:

“The people I’ve met through this community have literally made me a better person. Some took my hand and opened my way to kinder self-talk and more ethical ways to treat others.”

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While initial attendance was often driven by curiosity and experimentation, many respondents who continued in the scene described deep **personal transformation**. Early festivals became formative experiences that shaped people’s identity, values, and relationships. Many described neo-bush festivals as the first place they felt truly seen and accepted. The environment allowed people to explore creativity and connect emotionally with others.

“I was convinced to come by friends at a time when my life was falling apart. It really opened my eyes and I experienced genuine human connection and non-toxic relationships for one of the first times in my life. A truly life changing experience...”

“As someone who never felt like I fit in anywhere, it was amazing to get introduced to a community that was so welcoming and loving. I don’t remember ever feeling so much love and connection with complete strangers before going to rainbow.”

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### 4.4. Shared values as the “engine” of community

A clear pattern of **shared values** and **practices** emerged across the narratives. Respondents consistently described a set of norms that guide behaviour within the neo-bush festival



community and shape how people relate to one another. Kindness, acceptance, care, creativity, and environmental respect were described as facets of a **living culture** that people learn, practice, and pass on. These values were expressed through practices such as welcoming newcomers, sharing resources, volunteering time, contributing creative skills, supporting others' wellbeing, and caring for the environments where events are hosted. These frequently occurring values and practices are synthesised below.

## Shared Values

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### Acceptance & Inclusion

Respondents consistently described neo-bush festivals as spaces where they felt able to be themselves without judgement. Many spoke of finding “their people” for the first time and experiencing a level of acceptance they had not found elsewhere.

“As a neurodivergent woman, it's been a struggle for me to feel like I fit in anywhere, and it can be hard for me to understand how to navigate social situations. At bush festivals, I belong, I am free, I am accepted.”

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Intergenerational interaction was noted as particularly meaningful by one participant:

“I was impressed by the varying ages of attendees... very old couples with their house buses interacting with young people without a sense of hierarchy. It made me realise there were alternative ways of living and how important art and music was for human happiness.”

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Acceptance and inclusion were central to the narratives and appeared to be the catalyst for the development of enduring relationships and shared values.

### **Community, Relationships & Mutual Support**

Respondents frequently described forming deep friendships, chosen-family bonds, and support networks that extended well beyond the festival setting. These relationships were sustained over years and across life stages.

“The community we’ve created are the most authentic people... we are close friends because we’ve nurtured those friendships in a different context to normal society. I met my husband at a doof!”

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The neo-bush festival scene was portrayed as a community support system that people could rely on during difficult periods. These enduring ties reflect strong relational networks built through shared experience and repeated gathering.

“...it gave me my doof family. I have a whole support network of people in my life because of these parties.”

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### **Creativity, Participation & Contribution**

Neo-bush festivals were described as environments that actively encourage creative contribution rather than passive attendance. Respondents spoke about their involvement in music performance, visual art, stage design, costume, workshops, installation building, wellness practices, and education. For many, these spaces were entry points into creative careers and collaborative projects.

“I have attended as a punter various and many festivals, but after having children in my early 20’s I moved to the crew and building side of the scene... We ran children’s playgrounds... usually about circus skills for fun, co-operation and fine motor skills, also enabling children to feel the same sense of freedom of expression offered to adults in this community, but under safe and supervised conditions.”

“...It has shaped a lot of my core values, it has deepened my relationships with friends, and expanded my network. In the early days, it taught me transferable skills for work and life as I helped set up events, volunteered, and became part of the community.”

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## Healing, Personal Growth & Wellbeing

Respondents frequently linked their involvement in the scene to emotional recovery, self-development, and improved mental well-being. Some wrote of finding relief from anxiety, isolation, or difficult life experiences through the combination of connecting with others and being immersed in music and nature.

“...That Sunday morning, I watched the sun rise and felt feelings missing since childhood- happiness...”

“...I was convinced to come by friends at a time when my life was falling apart. It really opened my eyes and I experienced genuine human connection and non-toxic relationships for one of the first times in my life.”

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These gatherings were often framed as restorative places where people could reconnect with themselves and others in ways not possible in everyday life.

## Environmental Care

Environmental awareness and care were described as core cultural values. Respondents spoke about respect for land, appreciation of natural environments, and the importance of gathering in bush settings. These values were closely linked to the outdoor nature of the events and to a broader cultural ethos centred on connection to place.

“My values towards protecting the earth and climate change have been shaped by the wonderful workshops.”

“It promotes the importance of taking care of the environment, understanding why and how it impacts others.”

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For many, involvement in the scene strengthened ecological awareness and a sense of responsibility toward the environments that host these gatherings.

## 4.5. Micro-economies and creative livelihoods

Many respondents described neo-bush festivals as environments that support creative careers and micro-businesses. One respondent wrote:

“It shaped my entire life... My network is MASSIVE... I’ve built two businesses from it, and without this community, it would not work.”

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A major theme in the responses was the movement from attendee to contributor. Many described entering the scene with little intention beyond attending an event, then ‘finding themselves’ and gradually becoming part of the community through volunteering or working.

People described:

- Joining decor teams
- Learning audio or lighting skills
- Helping with builds and pack-downs
- Offering wellbeing or safety support
- Creating art, installations, or performances
- Starting businesses connected to festival culture

Several contributors emphasised that the scene had fundamentally shaped their careers and relational networks. For some, festival involvement grew into a full-time livelihood:

“It has become my livelihood, my work, my play... If it wasn't for festivals, I wouldn't be able to pay off my mortgage or look after my family. I wouldn't have employees.”

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Together, these narratives show that participation is active. People who attend neo-bush festivals are not merely consumers of entertainment. The festival scene serves as a learning environment and creative incubator, where people gain skills, knowledge, and a sense of purpose.

## 4.6. Social capital outcomes: bonding, bridging, and linking connections

Viewed through a social capital lens, the consultation responses indicate that neo-bush festivals generate three types of connections associated with community wellbeing and resilience: bonding, bridging, and linking capital.

**Bonding capital** refers to close, trusting relationships among people who share strong ties, such as friends and family networks (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Bonding capital was visible in stories of enduring friendships and family-like support systems formed through the scene. These accounts reflect long-term trust, emotional closeness, and mutual care.

**Bridging capital** describes connections across different social groups, enabling people with diverse backgrounds, roles, or skills to interact and cooperate (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Bridging capital appeared in descriptions of artists, builders, organisers,

volunteers, and newcomers working alongside one another. Respondents described collaborative environments where knowledge, skills, and responsibilities were shared across roles and experience levels.

**Linking capital** refers to relationships that connect people to opportunities, resources, and positions beyond their immediate peer networks, including pathways into work, skills, or new roles (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Linking capital was evident where involvement in the scene created routes into creative work, small business activity, event roles, and skill development over time. Contributors frequently described the scene as a platform that expanded their capacity and opened new possibilities.

## Outcomes



Together, these findings indicate that neo-bush festivals operate as a form of **social infrastructure**. They are environments where strong relationships form, shared norms and practices are cultivated and reinforced, and people build the confidence and skills to contribute to the community and beyond.

### 4.7. Stigma and misunderstanding

The findings of this consultation sit against a backdrop of stigma where “doofs” have often been publicly framed through illegality, sensationalised drug narratives and negative characterisations of patrons. There was awareness among the respondents of these negative public perceptions, and some comments served to actively challenge this:

“I think people are worried about doofs because they don’t understand what it is we are doing there... One councillor who visited a site I was working on actually said, “So, you’re just camping & listening to music?”

With the way everyone is carrying on in town, I thought I was going to get murdered”. People don’t understand & therefore they are afraid...”

“...For context, I’m a middle-aged woman who works in orthopedic medicine. We have punters who are doctors, nurses, paramedics, psychiatrists, law enforcement, teachers & many other professions. We are well educated & just looking for a good time...”

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This mismatch between lived culture and public framing requires attention, because stigma can translate into regulatory suspicion, approval barriers, and reduced willingness to support properly organised events as legitimate cultural assets.

## **5. Policy & sector implications**

If neo-bush festivals are to attract sustained community and government support, they need to be understood as forms of social infrastructure, not just entertainment events. Their value lies in their utility to generate lasting social capital, and in turn, resilient and capable communities. This report culminates in the following recommendations for local governments, public arts agencies, and industry bodies:

### **Recognise the social value of neo-bush festivals**

Neo-bush festivals operate as temporary community hubs rather than one-off events. They are places where relationships form, skills develop, and prosocial values are formed and practised.

### **Challenge stigma and outdated assumptions**

Stigma and sensationalised portrayals continue to shape regulatory responses. This can lead to mistrust and unnecessary barriers. A more accurate public understanding of the neo-bush festival culture will support more balanced and workable outcomes.

### **Strengthen documentation of festivals’ social and cultural value**

Economic and industry impacts are often well documented, yet the social and cultural contributions of music festivals remain less consistently measured and articulated. Public agencies and industry bodies can support research, data collection, and evaluation approaches that better capture these dimensions of value. This work should adopt a nuanced approach that recognises the diversity of Australia’s festival landscape, including smaller-scale and culturally distinctive sub-genres whose contributions may not be visible through standard economic and industry indicators.

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## About the Author

This report was prepared by **Maddison Norton** of **Norton Research Consulting**. Maddison is an independent social researcher based in Bellingen, NSW.

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## Independence and Disclosure

This whitepaper was independently developed and was not commissioned or funded by any organisation, government body, or industry group. The work was undertaken on the author's own initiative in response to ongoing challenges facing the neo-bush festival scene. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are those of the author.

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## Nature of the Consultation

The insights presented in this report are drawn from a voluntary, anonymous community consultation with participants in the neo-bush festival scene. The perspectives reflect lived experiences shared by contributors and are intended to document community voices rather than provide statistically representative findings.

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## Use of this Report

This whitepaper is provided as an open-access resource to support discussion, advocacy, and policy engagement relating to the Australian festival sector. It may be shared and cited with appropriate attribution.

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