On 11 November 2011 an arts in health paper, developed with the assistance of the Arts and Health Foundation (AHF) and calling for the development of a national arts in health policy, was passed through the Australian Government’s Standing Council on Health. This decision was supported at the meeting of arts and cultural ministers in March 2012.

These decisions were a response to the AHF’s campaign for a national policy for arts and health driven by the desire to enable improvements in the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities through a more cohesive approach to knowledge sharing and sector development for contemporary research and practice in arts and health.

Australia’s first arts and health policy will have been developed by March 2013, so the 12th National Rural Health Conference will provide a timely opportunity to review the policy and provide an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses against:

- the opportunities and challenges presented by attempts to develop cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary policy
- the scope of the policy and its ability to embrace a focus on wellbeing rather than ill health
- its alignment to the values and principles driving arts and health practice in Australia
- the expectations of the arts and health sectors on what a national policy framework should deliver
- the opportunities and constraints provided by the current policy environment in both the arts and health sectors.

This analysis will be supported by a brief overview of AHF’s activities to develop and inform a national policy including:

- three years of quantitative research and consultation with the arts and health sectors in Australia
- the development of strategic partnerships with key organisations, including the Victorian Health Foundation (VicHealth), the National Rural Health Alliance, Arts in Health at Flinders Medical Centre and Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADAA WA)
- establishment of two online platforms to support the Australian arts and health community
• a submission in response to the National Cultural Policy Discussion Paper demonstrating the role that an arts and health policy could play in the Arts Minister’s whole-of-government approach to arts policy

• convening a national arts and health policy forum in Parliament House, Canberra, in June 2012

• facilitating the consultation process to provide input to the draft Arts and Health Framework developed for the Standing Council on Health.