# Regional Arts Network 2019–2025

The case studies included in this report were written by Jo Pickup and Dr Vahri McKenzie of Edith Cowan University (WA), based on interviews with Regional Arts Network (RAN) leaders and developed in collaboration with Regional Arts WA. This case study captures key outcomes achieved through the establishment of the RAN during 2019-2025 through the initiative's 'hub' model framework.

# CASE STUDY 3

## Trust built for regional community benefit

The RAN's first five years has stimulated increased arts and cultural activity for WA regional artists, communities and audiences. Many of these activities can be directly attributed to the RAN initiative and the reputational value and connections RAWA has generated for its members. In essence, the RAN has proven to be an extremely effective leveraging mechanism, and numerous RAN organisations described how RAN incentives encouraged them to strengthen their ties with local stakeholders, leading to the delivery of important new arts activities in their communities.

As observed by Margaret River community environmental educator and volunteer organiser of community events Tracey Muir, the strengthened bonds between RAN organisations and local stakeholders over the past five years have resulted in noticeable differences in regional arts participation. "We have seen the success of what RAN organisation Arts Margaret River has been doing, and the community benefits that have come from its activities, especially in terms of people's wellbeing and the community resilience-building effects they have been providing".

**FUNDING PARTNERS**

Australian Government Regional Arts Fund

Regional arts Australia

Minderoo Foundation

The Ian Potter Foundation

Similarly, Shire of Manjimup's Director of Community Services, Gail Ipsen Cutts described the RAN as "lifting the bar" for artists and their regional audiences in terms of the scale and quality of the arts activities and events happening within their communities. Ipsen Cutts commented that the Shire of Manjimup's cultural program "has always been about providing exposure for artists and showing people in our community who don't normally have great opportunities to be exposed to art and cultural events the vast range of different art-forms and styles that artists are working in". But more recently, the Director has observed that "through the increased efforts from organisations like Southern Forest Arts, more people in the Shire's community are expecting these events to happen. Before, there wasn't so much of an expectation for quality arts activities, but there is now, and the attendance numbers to the Shire's arts and cultural events and exhibitions have grown to reflect that expectation, too".

These sentiments from those outside the RAN reflect how encouragement of stronger ties between regional arts organisations and local stakeholders – especially Local Government stakeholders – has led to more meaningful arts engagement in these regional communities.

Fairy Queen - the Carnival as part of Indian Ocean Craft 2024, supported by Arts Margaret River. Photo by Christopher Young (2024).

# Gardiner Street Arts Collective's LGA partnership

A particularly compelling example of a RAN organisation that has used its membership to extend its influence within its local community is Gardiner Street Arts Collective. According to Artistic Director Nyree Taylor, the RAN's encouragement of its member organisations to build closer connections with their local stakeholders allowed Gardiner Street to lift its standing within its local network. Further, they are now seen as a dependable professional entity for stakeholders to partner with to deliver important local arts projects.

In 2023-24, the Shire of Moora invited Gardiner Street Arts Collective to present a major Shire-managed live performance event by touring WA performers and musicians Whiskey & Boots (artists Mark Storen and Georgia King). Taylor described this new partnership arrangement – which involved Gardiner Street Arts Collective receiving service fees from the Shire to host the shows, staff the venue and help promote the season – as built around a newly-developed RAN-driven relationship of mutual trust between the organisations.

Taylor said, "The RAN pushed us to talk more with our Shire, and without that relationship-building work and our enhanced status as a RAN member, it would have taken us longer to start working with the Shire in the way we are now, like with the Whiskey & Boots *Mama Stitch* shows."

Similarly, Gardiner Street's enhanced profile and reputation has allowed it to act as a vital facilitator between its local Shire and touring arts companies, who may not be familiar with how to work in small regional towns. In one case, "their lines of communication with the Shire weren't well established, so they encountered difficulties when they arrived. But because I was able to step in and help facilitate communications with the Shire and help them out on the ground in some other ways, it all worked out, and the project ended up being a huge success for the Shire".

She continued, "It might not have worked out that way, but because there was such trust and understanding between Gardiner Street and the other stakeholders, we could help to problem-solve and effectively support the project". – Nyree Taylor, Artistic Director, Gardiner Street Arts Collective.

Gardiner Street Arts Collective's strong relationship with its Shire, which it had built via its RAN-related advocacy work, was a key factor in allowing Taylor and Gardiner Street to be vital point of contact and an effective facilitator in delivering this important regional arts activity.

Neil Gray spoon woodcarving workshop, supported by Gardiner Street Arts Collective. Photo by Nyree Taylor (2024).

Ebb and Flow Charcoal workshop . addlemay Ryder Bartley and Shireen Manning, creating works with guidance from Ebb and Flow Artist Nyree Taylor, supported by Gardiner Street Arts Collective. Photo by Nyree Taylor (2024).

Collaborative piece from the Yorna Yarning group, supported by Gardiner Street Arts Collective. Photo by Nyree Taylor (2024).

# RAN's broad impact and reputational power

The RAN initiative has been an effective way for Network members to extend and enhance their whole-of-sector work with a "shared language for advocacy" that is vital to the growth and sustainability of WA's regional arts sector. As David Bowman-Bright of North Midlands Project explained, the RAN's work on Regional Arts WA's Thrive! Framework enabled RAN Hubs to use a common language and key themes to broaden and deepen their conversations with important local stakeholders for the benefit of the sector at large.

"The value proposition that is embedded in Thrive! is key for us in the conversations we have with local government, local schools and other stakeholders, because it allows us to lead with the message of impact. Obviously, our arts activities will always be a very important part of the conversations, but Thrive! has allowed us to lead with statements about why we are doing this work: because it's about the connectivity of communities and the health and wellbeing of communities".

On an individual level, RAN members have noted their higher standing within local stakeholder circles on account of their association with the RAN. One noted, "When our staff member was in a Council and local business meeting, they took her more seriously because they knew she was a RAN representative". They added that their organisation's elevated RAN status has also boosted their credibility in other business forums, saying that, "Our association with the RAN has helped these business stakeholders to realise that our work has real value for the community".

A powerful example of the RAN's leveraging capacities lies in The Junction Co's recent success in securing a City of Karratha tender to manage the Red Earth Arts Precinct exhibition program for the next two years (valued at $90,000 per year). Each year, The Junction Co. will present six exhibitions and workshops at the Precinct, employing local community members and providing training in curation and artwork installation. This marks a significant expansion of the organisation's reach across its region.

As former The Junction Co. Regional Manager Valeria Scoponi explained, "One of the key points the City noted during the tender process was our strong connection to the wider regional arts sector, which they greatly valued. I believe that was a major factor in their decision to award us the tender and the management of this exhibition program".

This achievement builds on major opportunities secured by The Junction Co. that were brought about by the positive influence and leveraging value of the RAN. In 2023-24 The Junction Co was invited by the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) to exhibit the State Art Collection in the Pilbara for the first time, as part of a three-year program. Former The Junction Co. CEO Sandy Harvey said, "I think that being part of the RAN definitely helped with that sort of connection. We ended up on the radar and more visible to them because of our involvement".

In light of the RAN's 2025 expansion from 8 to 20 members, the Network's powerful leveraging effects are likely to intensify in coming years. The increased membership offers strong potential for a greater proportion of successful grant, tender and high-profile exhibition invitations for affiliated WA regional arts organisations and artists.

Crowd watching and thoroughly enjoying Perth Symphony Orchestra at GSAC Community Exhibition 2024. Photo by Bilyarndi Studio (2024).

# RAN's future direction and sustainable growth

The final standout case of the RAN's capacity-building effects can be seen in the recent growth and expanded reach of Southern Forest Arts, which has more than doubled its size and the number of regional areas it services because of its involvement in the Network. While Southern Forest Arts has experienced the greatest growth of all RAN members, leading to many important benefits for the organisation and its community, it has also presented new challenges for the organisation. As Southern Forest Arts Artistic Director and General Manager Fiona Sinclair described, "The RAN has enabled us to increase our profile and apply for more money. It has also given us really fantastic statistics that we can then put into our funding applications, and we can be more competitive and show that we can run big projects successfully. But this is also a conundrum for us, because every time we apply for funding, a lot of that funding needs to go to these larger, inter-regional projects like the Regional Arts Triennial, which means I can't resource all the projects I want to run in my own backyard."

She added that, "There are so many tensions you are managing all the time as a regional arts organisation manager, and that is a new one". This is pertinent to the RAN's future strategic outlook as RAWA plans to sustainably coordinate an expanded state-wide arts network and establish a Creative Collaborative Fund to support the RAN members to deliver cross-sector collaborative projects and locally led place-based activities.

The RAN initiative has supported member organisations to stand stronger together without sacrificing their distinctiveness. Sinclair says, "What's been great about the RAN is the way it's brought us together without compromising our uniqueness as individual arts organisations. For us at Southern Forest Arts, our growth trajectory in a short space of time has been challenging to manage, but ultimately, the RAN has brought us a lot more benefits than challenges. It's allowed so many things to happen that simply would not have moved forward without it".