Insights Report

National Performing Arts Technical Safety & Workforce Meeting Abridged Version

October 2025

Report prepared by Penny Miles
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Photo: Kim McMaster

About this report

This report was commissioned by the national and state Performing Arts Presenter Associations. It is the outcome of the engagement of consultant Penny Miles, to facilitate a meeting on National Performing Arts Technical Workforce and Safety.

Held at Melbourne Theatre Company, the meeting ran from 12-5pm on 28 October and 9am-1pm on 29 October 2025. The meeting was convened by the Performing Arts Presenter Associations (PAPA). PAPA is a network of membership organisations representing the presenting ecology in Australia with memberships including presenters, venues and producers. A network of peer organisations, the PAPA works to provide a collaborative and coordinated approach to identifying and addressing shared strategic priorities and advocacy, in support of their memberships and the performing arts sector nationwide.

Attendees at the meeting were representatives from the PAPA & invited SMEs representing venue technical networks, SaCSA, and producing and touring technical expertise. Follow-up consultation was also undertaken with representatives unable to attend the in-person meeting.

Performing Arts Presenter Associations

CircuitWest

NSW & ACT Performing Arts Centres Association, NAPACA

Performing Arts Connections Australia, PAC Australia

South Australian Presenters Association, SAPA

Stage Queensland

Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres, VAPAC

Meeting Attendees		
Stewart Campbell	Production Manager Production Manager	Barking Gecko Theatre Filament Design
Philippa Maughan	Executive Director	CircuitWest
Sue Fenty	Manager, Workforce Development	CircuitWest
Cameron Malacari	Head of Technical Services TechWest Network Rep	Saltwater Busselton CircuitWest
Russell Stewart	Technical Coordinator Technical Managers Network Member	Wagga Wagga City Council NSW ACT Performing Arts Centres Association (NAPACA)
Josh Giuliano	Technical Services Manager Deputy Chair Technical Managers Network	Penrith Performing & Visual Arts NSW ACT Performing Arts Centres Association (NAPACA)
Belinda Gibson	Director President	Glen Street Theatre NSW ACT Performing Arts Centres Association (NAPACA)
Katherine Connor	Executive Director	PAC Australia
Bronwyn Coulston	Stakeholder Engagement Manager - Arts	Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA)
Tim Panitz	Operations & Technical Services Manager Chair Tech Managers Network	Empire Theatres Pty Ltd Stage Queensland
Suzan Williams	Executive Officer	Stage Queensland
Melenie Stevenson	Executive Director	Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)
Brett Tippet	Coordinator Technical Operations Chair Tech Managers Network	Gippsland Performing Arts Centre Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)
Murray Johnstone	Senior Manager Industry Development Initiative Taskforce	Technical Training & Development CEO, VACT Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Arts Centre Melbourne Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)
Tammy Ryan	Manager, Arts & Culture Chair	Frankston Arts Centre Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)
Emily O'Brien	Director Industry Development Initiative Taskforce	Elucidate Consulting pty ltd Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC)
Follow up Contributors		
Jason Bouvaird	Lighting Designer / Production Manager	Moving Light Productions Australia
Sussan Baldwin	Arts Centres Leader Chair	Country Arts SA South Australian Presenter Association (SAPA)

Executive Summary

Australia's performing arts technical workforce is experiencing a national crisis. This has been building across the entire pipeline from recruitment and training through to retention, but it is now manifesting most acutely in day-to-day workplace conditions and safety.

There is strong interest in technical careers, but challenges persist in the availability of contemporary training, the pace of technological change, and the capacity of the sector to sustain and retain experienced staff. The Meeting convened on 28–29 October 2025 confirmed that these pressures have reached a point of critical failure on the floor, evident in production schedules, safety practices, fatigue levels and the lived experience of technicians working within increasingly constrained systems and rising demand.

Participants described a sector in which longstanding structural vulnerabilities have converged with post-COVID impacts, heightened expectations and entrenched cultural norms. Rising incidents, growing fatigue, compressed production timelines, inconsistent safety practices and diminishing professional development opportunities are becoming defining features of the technical working environment. These conditions are further compounded by a deeply embedded 'show must go on' mindset that normalises unsafe workarounds and obscures the true scale of risk until failures become acute.

State-based venue associations and peak bodies have already taken active steps to respond to these pressures. This includes targeted workforce, training and capability-building initiatives led by organisations such as the Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres (VAPAC), including its Industry Development Initiative Taskforce, and CircuitWest's work addressing touring, workforce resilience and technical capacity. National skills bodies, including Services and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA), are also undertaking work relevant to training pathways and workforce sustainability. In addition, many state-based networks convene Technical Managers meetings to regularly address shared safety, workforce and operational challenges.

While the primary focus of these initiatives is often government-owned venues, the issues they address both influence and are influenced by touring practices, production timelines, technical feasibility and safety responsibilities that sit across organisational boundaries. Many emerging strategies and tools therefore have relevance and potential application across the wider performing arts sector.

The scale and nature of the challenges extend beyond what any single state, venue network or organisation can address alone. Cross-border workforce mobility, touring conditions, federal policy settings and the absence of consistent national training and competency standards require coordinated action at a national level.

The Meeting identified this moment as a significant opportunity to align existing state-led and sector-led initiatives with collaborative national leadership. Addressing gaps that cannot be influenced at a state level, particularly those affecting workplace conditions, will require a unified and strategic approach across the full workforce pipeline.

Across the two-day Meeting, participants mapped the drivers of the crisis, identified key influencers for systemic change, affirmed a shared set of design principles and began conceptualising practical solutions.

To support implementation, this Report proposes a three-horizon roadmap to manage the scale of reform required. Immediate actions focus on raising awareness, empowering technical staff and establishing simple mechanisms for coordination and information-sharing.

Medium-term priorities include testing tools, piloting shared training approaches and strengthening programming and touring decision-making to reduce operational risk. Longer-term efforts centre on establishing national standards, building clear training and career pathways, and supporting a sustainable, mobile and professionally recognised technical workforce.

The work ahead is substantial. However, the depth of engagement and leadership already demonstrated across venue associations, peak bodies and national skills organisations reflects both the urgency of the challenge and the opportunity to build a safer, more sustainable future for Australia's performing arts technical workforce.

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Introduction

On 28 and 29 October 2025, representatives from the national and state Performing Arts Presenters Associations, together with invited Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), convened for an inaugural meeting focused on strengthening technical safety and workforce sustainability across Australia's performing arts venues.

The Meeting brought together those working closest to technical delivery, governance, training and sector development to examine the pressures emerging across the technical workforce and the implications for venue operations and production environments. Rather than seeking to resolve issues on the spot, the Meeting aimed to build a shared understanding of system dynamics, surface the perspectives of technicians and leaders, and clarify where collective action would be most valuable.

Through facilitated discussions, participants explored the interconnected nature of workforce, training, programming and safety challenges; heard examples of lived experience from venues of different scales; and examined the diverse roles played by venues, producers, training bodies, regulators and governments. The Meeting also began mapping where influence, responsibility and capability sit within the system and identified areas where coordinated effort could support meaningful change.

Following the Meeting, the facilitator also consulted with representatives who were unable to attend in person. These conversations helped reinforce Meeting themes and broaden the evidence base.

This Insights Report consolidates the observations, themes and early concepts emerging from the Meeting and subsequent consultations. It is intended as a sector-informed starting point for national coordination, rather than a prescriptive set of solutions, and provides a platform for continued collaboration to strengthen the safety, sustainability and long-term viability of the technical workforce.

Key observations

The technical workforce is at a breaking point

Conditions across the technical workforce have reached a level of strain that is no longer sustainable, with risks escalating faster than systems can respond.

The crisis is generated from multiple, converging pressure points

Workforce shortages, outdated training, inconsistent safety practices, programming pressure and organisational culture interact in ways that amplify one another, creating a system where vulnerabilities compound across the workforce pipeline.

Workplace conditions carry the most strain

While recruitment, training and retention challenges persist, the sharpest pressure is visible at the point of delivery, where venues, producers and touring companies intersect. Fatigue, insufficient staffing, compressed schedules and operational strain are driving workforce depletion faster than replenishment efforts.

Entrenched mindsets mask systemic risk

The longstanding belief that ‘the show must go on’ normalises unsafe workarounds, diminishes the visibility of risk and suppresses early escalation of safety concerns.

Risk awareness and capability are uneven across high-risk systems

Understanding of the complexities and hazards associated with flying systems, automation and other specialised technologies varies significantly between organisations, creating inconsistent safety baselines.

Funding settings are intensifying operational pressure

Government funding models and performance expectations, including KPIs related to utilisation, output and delivery, are increasingly placing pressure on venues and companies to deliver beyond available workforce capacity.

Responsibility is fragmented and influence is uneven

Safety, programming, training and workforce oversight sit across multiple entities, with no single point of authority. This fragmentation makes coordinated and consistent approaches difficult to achieve.

Cultural change is essential to system reform

Technical fixes and new tools will not succeed without parallel cultural shifts in attitudes to risk, production pressure, safety norms and the relationship between artistic ambition and workplace wellbeing.

Reform must be staged, iterative and informed by evidence

Meaningful improvement requires immediate actions, medium-term testing and piloting of new approaches, and long-term structural reform supported by data, learning and sustained coordination.

Recommendations

Reform Coordination

RECOMMENDATION ONE
Utilise the PAPA network as lightweight national coordination mechanism to guide early actions and maintain momentum

RECOMMENDATION TWO
Adopt and promote a shared reform narrative to ensure consistent framing of the safety and workforce crisis across all jurisdictions and stakeholder groups

RECOMMENDATION THREE
Apply the agreed design principles to test, prioritise and sequence solutions as they are developed

RECOMMENDATION FOUR
Utilise a rolling, staged Solutions Roadmap to guide sequencing, adapt to emerging insights, and ensure reforms remain coordinated without locking the sector into rigid or premature action plans

RECOMMENDATION FIVE
Conduct regular influencer mapping to determine who needs to be engaged for each action and how messages should be sequenced

RECOMMENDATION SIX
Operate at a pace that allows for effective change management to address entrenched mindsets, challenge outdated assumptions, and anticipate the impacts of reform

First Horizon Implementation

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN
Action initial communication plans to raise awareness of immediate safety risks and outline the intent and direction of national reform

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT
Develop and circulate simple self-audit tools to help venues understand current safety practices and identify immediate gaps

RECOMMENDATION NINE
Coordinate safety alerts on high-risk systems where inconsistent capability and awareness pose urgent concerns

RECOMMENDATION TEN
Share existing safety and workforce resources across venues to support consistency in early messaging and practice

RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN
Identify and recognise safety ‘champions’ within venues and organisations to model desired behaviours, support communication efforts and encourage early adoption of actions

RECOMMENDATION TWELVE
Investigate adjustments to touring practices by auditing key stages of tour development, including the role of touring markets as early intervention points, to reduce risk and improve safety across touring cycles.

Reform Context

Photo: Murray Johnstone

Defining the crisis

There are multiple issues and factors contributing to the technical workforce and safety crisis. Some are recent, exacerbated after COVID, and others are long-term.

While COVID-19 accelerated existing workforce pressures, including the loss of experienced staff, simultaneously many Local Government venues experienced increased expectations of service delivery; revenue was constrained by rate-capping policies at the same time as community demand across all local services has increased.
As Local Government is the largest segment of the national performing arts venue network, this adds scale to the severity of issues impacting the technical sector.

There are also systemic barriers to resolving or abating issues across the technical workforce. A staged strategic approach to change will be required to address the immediate risks and establish enduring solutions.

Key issues

- Sector Resilience at its Limits
  The workforce is operating under sustained pressure, with rising expectations and diminishing structural support pushing the system beyond its capacity.
- Eroding Safety Margin Informal and anecdotal channels highlight an increase in near misses, alongside widespread fatigue and inconsistent practices. These conditions are heightening concern about the frequency and potential severity of incidents..
- Fragile Workforce Pipeline Regional shortages, inconsistent training quality, outdated skills development for emerging technologies, and limited progression pathways are weakening the workforce faster than it can be replenished.
- Ambition Outpacing Capacity Artistic and programming expectations have grown significantly, but staffing levels and planning time have not kept pace. This is leading to the sense of delivering “2025 ambition with a 1995 workforce model.”
- Unsustainable Presentation Models
  Cost-driven schedules with tight turnarounds and minimal rest have transferred significant risk onto technical teams who often inherit challenges created earlier in the production chain. This relates to touring as well as overall schedules of hires and events.
- Deepening Regional Inequity
  Venues with extremely small teams struggle to meet production and compliance demands, exacerbated by limited access to training and relief staff.

The Meeting also noted that particular technical systems pose elevated and immediate safety risks, especially counterweight flying systems and theatre automation. Several venues reported low organisational awareness of the expertise and protocols required to safely operate these systems.

This has already prompted urgent interventions in some regions. Participants stressed that national standards, accreditation requirements and clear competency expectations for high-risk systems must form part of early reform efforts.

Barriers to improvements

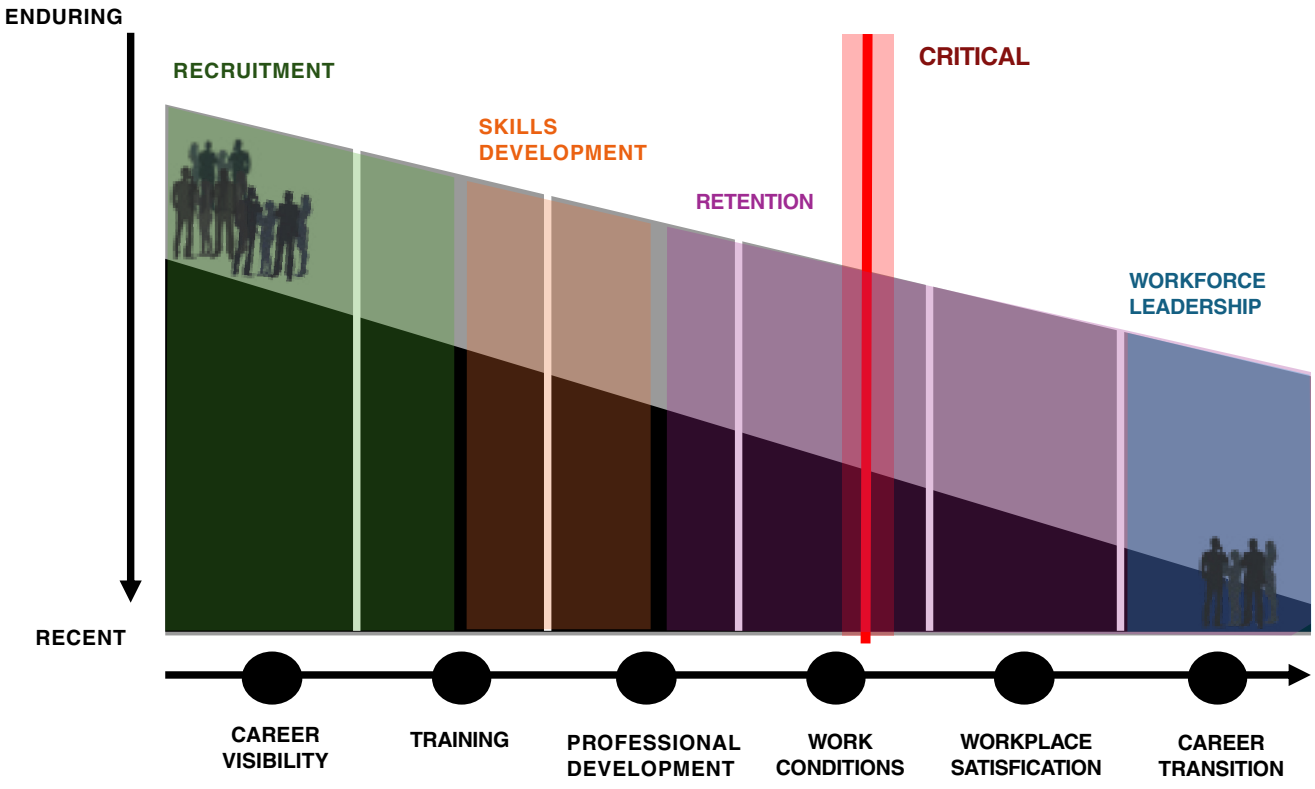
- Fragmented Responsibility Safety, staffing, training and production oversight are dispersed across multiple bodies, leaving no single entity able to enforce consistency or intervene effectively creating gaps where risks fall between organisations.
- ‘The Show Must Go On’ Culture Masking the Crisis
  A deeply embedded industry mindset prioritises delivering the show at all costs, normalising unsafe workarounds and concealing the scale of workforce strain. This culture prevents issues from being surfaced early and obscures the urgency of systemic intervention.
- Insufficient empowerment
  Workforce availability pressures can see less experienced or junior technical staff covering high-risk responsibilities without adequate authority to escalate concerns. This constrains reporting, delays early problem identification and weakens the feedback loop to drive consistent improvement.
- Lack of National Data Inconsistent definitions and reporting practices limit visibility of risk across the sector. This includes the absence of consistent near-miss reporting, limited sharing of hazard information identified during touring, and a lack of aggregated data to support coordinated action and evidence-based advocacy.

Overall Impact

Every stage of the workforce pipeline is affected by longstanding, recent and emerging pressures.
For example:

- **Recruitment and skills development** are under increasing pressure from more contemporary issues such as the discontinuation of arts in school curriculum and higher education courses. Quality of practical experience in existing tertiary studies is diminishing and professional development opportunities for new technology and equipment is limited.
- **Retention** has a range of enduring and new challenges including the persistent sector mindset of 'The Show Must Go on' and increasing factors such as workforce being enticed to other industries by more competitive salaries and workplace conditions. Overtime and fatigue are chronic challenges which are exacerbated by ongoing and unrealistic KPI demands on venues.
- **Workforce leadership** suffers from the longstanding issue of limited structured opportunities for career transition which in turn reduces opportunity for mentoring and skills transference to bolster retention factors of professional development and workplace satisfaction.

All the forces compound one another, accelerating workforce attrition and diminishing overall capacity. The sector's resilience has now weakened to the point where working conditions and safety are at critical risk. In this context the consultation identified safety involves both physical and mental wellbeing impacts.



Key influencers

Given the barrier of fragmented responsibility, the Forum examined which bodies and groups hold the greatest potential to influence change and support solution delivery.

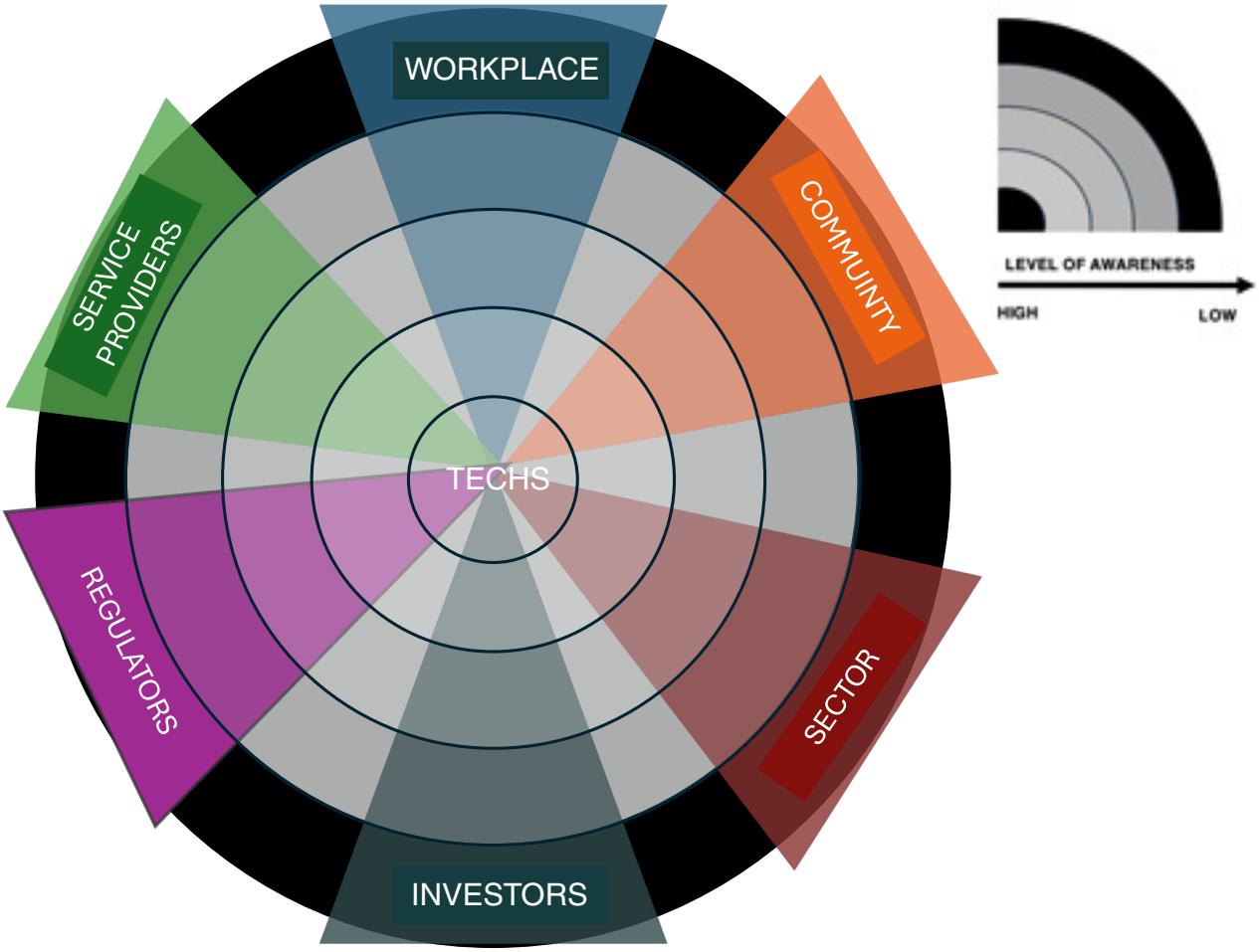
The diagram below reflects this discussion, grouping entities according to their awareness of the issues and their capacity to influence outcomes.

Stakeholders' levels of awareness and influence will shift depending on the specific issues, actions or solutions in focus. For example, production companies may have higher interest and impact in relation to programming matters, but comparatively lower engagement with training-related reforms.

These shifting roles underscore the need for a sophisticated communications and partnership approach – one that carefully sequences messages, adapts to evolving priorities and identifies which stakeholders should be positioned as lead influencers at each stage of implementation.

To support this, it is recommended that influencer mapping be undertaken when developing individual solutions to ensure communication, partnerships and advocacy efforts are accurately aligned.

Mapping Template



Solution design

The scale and complexity of the issues identified through the Meeting indicate a need to stabilise the system immediately while laying the groundwork for long-term reform.

The crisis cannot be addressed through isolated actions or venue-by-venue interventions. A coordinated national effort, underpinned by shared principles and a consistent narrative, is required.

While national coordination can introduce several circuit-breaker initiatives to catalyse change, many reforms will require sustained commitment and may take years to demonstrate full impact. Workforce transformation of this nature typically takes 5-10 years to mature across all stages of the pipeline.

Given the number of influential entities involved and the likelihood that reforms will intersect with existing programs, partnerships and policy settings, reform coordination will need to remain responsive to emerging opportunities. As several challenges are systemic, a change-management approach will be essential to successful implementation.

To support the flexibility required it is recommended a Solutions Roadmap be used to guide and sequence reforms, rather than developing a detailed Action Plan upfront.

Roadmap Horizons

To address the scale of the crisis, it is proposed the Roadmap is structured around three horizons:

HORIZON	GOAL	Success outline
IMMEDIATE: First 6 months	Growing visibility and empowered voices	An industry broadly aware of the scale of the safety challenge, with technical workers feeling supported and confident to speak up, share knowledge and highlight immediate risks.
SHORT TERM: Within 18 months	Coordinated action underway	A national network actively testing practical tools, piloting shared training approaches, and strengthening connections between producers, venues and technical crews to embed safer work practices.
LONGER TERM: 5+ years	A thriving technical workforce	A respected and sustainable technical workforce supported by consistent national standards, clear and contemporary training pathways, and an industry culture where safety and wellbeing are core measures of success.

Design principles

To help keep future reform efforts focused and adapt to changing conditions without losing sight of the overarching goals and shared vision, the Meeting developed the following set of design principles.

As actions and initiatives are developed, they will be tested against this list of principles.

SCALABILITY Solutions designed for **national reach and adaptability**, able to be implemented different types of venues and organisations	EXPERIENCED CENTRED Experiences of **technicians**, those most affected by safety risks key input for solutions	INDUSTRY-DESIGNED & LED Change **should be owned by the industry,** with government support, not driven solely by regulation
EQUITY & REGIONAL RECOGNITION Acknowledge **different starting points** and resourcing levels between metropolitan, outer-metro and regional venues	SHARED RESPONSIBILITY Embed a culture of **collective accountability** between venues, producers, presenters, and funders	RISK-AWARE DECISION MAKING Apply a **risk appetite framework** that tests decisions for unintended consequences and prioritises safety
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT Treat all solutions as iterative; **evaluate, adapt, and update** as the roadmap is implemented	LEVERAGE DRIVEN Draw on **sector or other industry learnings & models**, amplify what works, seek out **partners** for efficiency & impact	RESPECT & CARE Consider the reasonable **call on time of Subject Matter Experts** (Technical representatives) supporting the reform agenda

Change Management Considerations

Achieving meaningful and lasting reform across the technical workforce will require more than new tools, standards or coordination mechanisms.

The Meeting recognised that some of the most significant barriers to progress are cultural and behavioural, not structural. As such, a deliberate and sustained change management approach is essential to ensure reforms take hold across diverse venues, production environments and organisational cultures.

In this context, change management is not a separate workstream but an underpinning discipline for all reform efforts. It provides the mindset, tools and practices needed to challenge entrenched norms, build shared purpose and support the sector through the transition to safer, more sustainable and professionally recognised technical work.

Sector-wide change requires three conditions to be met:

- shared dissatisfaction with the current state
- clear and shared vision
- credible process for change and improvement

The Meeting discussions demonstrated that all three elements are emerging, but further work is needed to consolidate understanding across the workforce, venue leadership, producers, training bodies and government partners.

Cultural change

A key focus for change management will be addressing deeply embedded mindsets and sector workplace culture.

The most prevalent is the longstanding belief that ‘the show must go on’; a cultural norm that has historically driven innovation and commitment. However, it is now contributing to unsafe workarounds, fatigue and suppressed reporting of risk.

Participants acknowledge this mindset will not shift through instructions or policies alone. It will require a sustained effort to reshape expectations, reinforce positive behaviours, celebrate safe practice and give technicians the confidence and authority to speak up.

Messaging, role-modelling, peer support and visible leadership commitment will all play a role in enabling this cultural shift. Interventions to slow touring or require rating systems may also be required to force awareness.

Valuing safety

Meeting discussions surfaced a perceived tension between artistic ambition and safe working conditions. While participants agreed this should not be treated as a simple binary choice, many noted that the current operating environment does not consistently support well-planned or well-resourced technical delivery. In this context, meaningful change will require a recalibration of expectations about what is feasible, alongside stronger decision-making that places safety, workforce capacity and wellbeing at the centre of artistic planning. Change management efforts will need to challenge outdated assumptions and support organisations to align artistic ambition with the realities of available resources and risk.

Unintended consequences

Another important element is preparing the sector for the impacts of change.

Any reform, whether improved programming feasibility processes, new expectations for touring companies or the introduction of safety standards, will generate consequences that may not be universally welcomed or have unintended consequences. Some will require additional planning time, shifts in scheduling, new competencies, or uncomfortable conversations about current practices.

The example of changes to overtime scheduling was referenced as a recent case study of how unintended consequences can play out. While the growing practice has been the reduction of overtime to prioritise safety, the impact has reduced the earning potential of casual technicians. This has put more pressure on the existing retention challenge of less competitive salaries in comparison to other industries.

A robust change management approach anticipates impacts and reactions, tests assumptions, communicates early, and helps organisations navigate the trade-offs required for long-term improvement. This includes acknowledging that not all outcomes will be immediate or positive, but that the cumulative effect of sustained action will strengthen safety and sustainability across the workforce.

Stakeholder understanding

Effective change management requires deep understanding of stakeholder motivations, pressures and constraints. Venues, producers, local governments, training bodies, designers, suppliers and technicians each hold different perspectives and levels of influence.

The Meeting's stakeholder mapping exercise highlighted the value of tailoring messages, sequencing engagement and identifying lead influencers for specific actions. This approach should continue as the roadmap evolves, ensuring reforms are not only designed well but adopted and enacted consistently across the system.

Core features of Change Management to embed

Pace of delivery -
allow enough time for exploration, reflection and adjustment rather than rushing toward premature solutions. Momentum rather than speed is the desired approach to timing

Consistent messaging - repeat core messages clearly and often to build alignment and reduce confusion

Stakeholder-centred engagement - understand the motivations, constraints and needs of different groups and tailor communication accordingly

Normalising adaptation - reinforce that all reforms will require iteration, trialling and refinement

Myth-busting and mindset-shifting - actively challenge outdated assumptions utilising case studies and evidence

Visible leadership behaviour - ensure leaders model the expectations and attitudes required for cultural change

Anticipation of impacts - prepare for unintended consequences and communicate them early and honestly

Collective responsibility - frame change as a shared task across venues, producers, training bodies and governments

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