

who we are

LISMORE SHIRE

creative sector profile and needs analysis | 2025

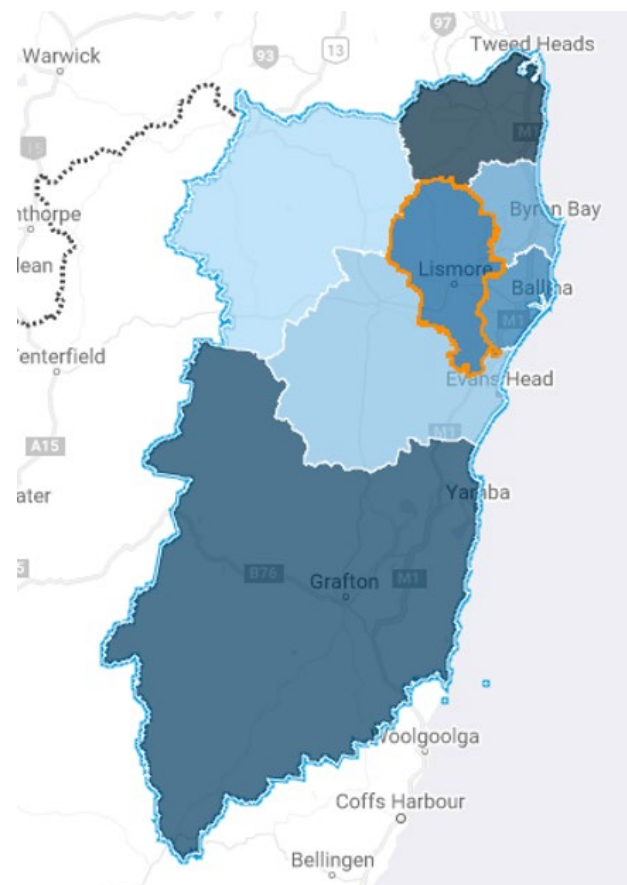


**ARTS
NORTHERN
RIVERS**



Nicknamed the Rainbow Region, Lismore is known for its diverse lifestyles, community spirit and fertile landscapes. Encompassing the regional centre of Lismore City along with smaller townships like Nimbin, Eltham and Clunes, it is home to 44,334 people.

Located near the intersection of the Wilson and Richmond rivers, on the lands of the Bundjalung nation, Lismore City was the epicentre of the 2022 flood and storm events, with the Audit Office of NSW reporting that 16.5% of properties in the LGA were affected.



Overview of creative sector

The creative sector represents around 2.8% of the Lismore workforce, with ABS data showing 235 creative businesses operating and 595 people employed

In the 2021 Census, there were 595 people in Lismore employed in a cultural, creative, or both cultural and creative occupation as their main job – making up 2.8% of the area's labour force. This makes it similar in size to other industries in the LGA like Transport, Postal and Warehousing (2.5%) and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (3.2%).

Lismore recorded a total of 235 creative businesses actively operating in 2021, with 10 turning over \$2M or more per annum.

In addition to businesses and employees, there are many artists, makers and audiences participating in the creative and cultural sectors in varied ways.

The creative attractions of the region include major regional institutions, artist-run initiatives (ARIs), festivals and events

The Lismore Regional Gallery is one of the longest-running cultural institutions in the region, and re-opened in 2024 after restoration following the 2022 flood and storm events.

Other major institutions and venues include the Northern Rivers Conservatorium (NRC), Lismore City Hall, Lismore Museum (still in recovery) and Lismore Library.

There are a range of private and community galleries and studios, including the Alan Ussher Glassblowing Studio, the studio and gallery of watercolourist Christine Porter, Flourish Art Gallery & Studio and Elevator ARI, which hosts pop-up exhibits from local creatives and the Serpentine Community Gallery, run by artists, for artists.

First Nations arts and cultural activity is strong in the LGA, including Flow Collective, a grassroots emerging community movement and arts collective with a studio space.

In Lismore City, The Quad is a public meeting place, a performance venue, a children's play space, a creative hub and a space for community expression. The Wilsons River Experience Walk includes sculptures, art installations and interpretative panels of local Aboriginal and colonial history. There's also an Aboriginal bush food garden.

The Lismore ArtsVenture Trail repurposes vacant shop fronts into innovative exhibition spaces and the constantly evolving Back Alley Gallery features more than 60 artworks, including large-scale murals, graffiti art, paste-ups, stencils and installations.

Elsewhere in the LGA, the town of Nimbin has street art and murals, and is home of the iconic Aquarius Festival. Eltham, Clunes and Bexhill are known for their historic buildings, creative retail and village atmosphere. Goonellabah has a community centre and library.

Organisations and initiatives that present creative activity in the LGA include:

- Lismore Lantern Parade, which celebrates art and community through illuminated puppets and fire art
- Regional performing arts organisation NORPA creates, produces and presents innovative original work and important theatre productions
- Tropical Fruits is an LGBTIQ+ community group and annual festival held on New Year's Eve
- The Eltham Hotel is a classic country pub with a vibrant music and performance program.

Other cultural activity includes the Channon Craft Market, Nimbin Market, Blue Knob Hall Gallery.

Lismore creative sector mapping results

Of the 678 respondents to the Northern Rivers Creative Sector Mapping Survey, a quarter (26%, n=173) currently reside in Lismore, providing insight into the area.

Among the 173 survey respondents living in Lismore LGA, 75% (n=129) are artists or creative practitioners and 36% (n=62) are working in the creative sector (including marketing, production, admin in a creative business or cultural organisation).

Others from Lismore who responded to the survey identify as mainly audience or community members (41%, n=71), working in a community organisation, charity or service provider (34%, n=58), working in government (6%, n=11) or as a supplier to the creative sector (5%, n=9).

Lismore creatives are engaged in a variety of art forms, including visual arts and crafts (62%), contemporary music (23%), creative industries (design, film, etc.) (19%), multi-arts (including video and sound art) (18%) and more.

Their practices intersect with a variety of themes, including the environment (49%), health and wellbeing (39%), access and inclusion (36%), technology (30%), children or young people (24%), Indigenous culture (22%) and others. In fact, Lismore-based artists are more likely to say their practice intersects with other areas (87%) compared to the Northern Rivers average (80%). The Lismore creative sector appears to have a strength in intersecting with environment, Indigenous culture, technology, health and wellbeing, and access and inclusion.

Overview of the creative arts sector

Lismore residents perceive the Northern Rivers creative sector as lively and adaptable – but they are concerned about the sustainability, both financial and environmental.

- The vast majority of respondents from Lismore (91%) say the Northern Rivers creative sector makes the community a better place to live and/or visit, and 81% say it brings people together.
- When asked to describe the Northern Rivers creative identity, the most commonly used words are ‘diverse’, ‘inclusive’ and resilient’.
- One person elaborated, “Speaking for Lismore, there’s a strong tradition of grassroots arts organisations and spaces because people tend to move here because of the cheap rent due to the floods. This is a double-edged sword because flooding is obviously also disruptive. In terms of Northern Rivers more generally, I see a lot of people moving here from the bigger cities and this allows for a flow of ideas between urban and rural conceptions of the world. So at its best it’s a kind of mixing ground between the two.”
- Most Lismore residents agree that the Northern Rivers is ‘strong’ in terms of artistic vibrancy (74%) and resilience (73%), while slightly smaller numbers feel positively about the health of the sector’s cultural practice and safety (48%) and access and inclusion (44%).
- Lismore respondents are concerned about the long-term health and future of the sector, with low numbers saying it is currently ‘strong’ in terms of financial (2.5%) and environmental (29%) sustainability.

“The Northern Rivers creative identity is vibrant and driven by a radical sense of social justice, inclusion and resilience.”

—Survey respondent, Lismore

Creative careers and artists in Lismore

Most Lismore creatives make and present their work locally, but there are sizeable numbers taking their work elsewhere

- A third (30%) of all of the creative work in the Northern Rivers occurs in Lismore LGA, and the majority of the 129 artists or creative practitioners from Lismore say their creative work has been mainly located in Lismore over the past 12 months (91%).
- Small proportions of Lismore artists are basing their creative work in other areas in the region, including Byron (12%), and Ballina (6%). Some are also travelling outside of the region (20%) or internationally (7%) for the making of their creative work.
- When it comes to presenting, selling or exhibiting their work, this is frequently happening in the Lismore area (71%) or outside of the Northern Rivers entirely (41%), along with presenting in other areas of the Northern Rivers like Byron (27%), Ballina (14%), or internationally (14%).
- Looking across the Northern Rivers, most artists are making and presenting their work in their own LGA, or outside the region. Within the region, Lismore and Byron are the most common LGAs artists visit to either make or present work. Lismore is favoured by artists from Kyogle and Richmond Valley, while artists from Tweed are more likely to travel to Byron.
- One Lismore respondent had a suggestion for Lismore: “Get to a Critical Mass. Making Lismore a focal point due to its lower costs and multiple opportunities. It’s important to demonstrate a spirited comeback, and to make something really positive in the wake of the floods.”

Lismore has relatively more established artists than the Northern Rivers average, but fewer say their creative practice is their main source of income, with room to grow sales

- Of the 129 creatives from Lismore who responded to the survey, more are established (36%), compared to emerging or early career (33%) or mid-career (22%) artists. Lismore’s proportion of mid-career artists is slightly lower than across the Northern Rivers on average (28%).
- Despite having proportionally more established artists, only a quarter (23%) of Lismore creatives say that their creative practice is their main source of income, which is less than the Northern Rivers average (27%). Another 42% say it’s not their main source of income but it is supplementary (compared to 39% across the region). Meanwhile, 27% say they don’t earn any income from it but they’d like to grow their earnings, which is similar to other areas.
- Amongst the 73 artists or creative practitioners living in Lismore who earn an income from their creative practice, most earn it via sales (69%), and other professional services like teaching, consulting, and facilitating (45%). Smaller proportions earn income through government funding (30%), funding from foundations or trusts (n=6), and sponsorships (n=2).
- The business model of Lismore artists appears to have a slightly different balance to other areas of the region, with more reliance on Government funding (30% in Lismore vs 22% elsewhere) and professional services (45% vs 40%) and less reliance on sales (69% vs 76%).

Lismore artists are concerned about education pathways, and are eager for professional development opportunities, particularly around collaboration and investment

- Many Lismore artists want to grow their creative practice and make it more sustainable, both financially and in terms of growing their audiences. Others want to work on their artistic skills, or grow their network of creative connections. One stated “I would like to continue my arts practice pushing my work to higher levels.”
- Lismore creatives are most interested in professional development opportunities around collaboration with other artists/creatives/arts workers/businesses (49%), possibly linked with the high numbers of independents in the region.
- There is also strong interest in assistance with grant-writing and attracting investment (30%) and masterclasses with established artists/creatives (28%).
- One respondent from Lismore suggested, “A Northern Rivers Art Fair where schools, creative institutions and creative businesses have a booth to present an installation on a theme to connect with the community in a festival style event. Something like this where it isn’t about competing or commercial sales, it’s purely creativity about what different groups are passionate about and having an open, playful, engaging, interactive discussion with the wider community. This can foster growth in the region and value art/creating as a way to connect and grow.”
- The survey pre-dates upheaval in the education sector, including cancellation of arts and design courses by Southern Cross University. However, survey

respondents were already concerned about education pathways prior to this. Respondents from Lismore expressed ideas such as:

- “Reinvigorating visual arts education even if it means developing an independent art school along the lines of Byron School of Art.”
- “Bring back TAFE campus. It’s important to have training in picture making skills and techniques (and by pictures I mean all artforms) as well as artwork about ideas, which the uni provides. For a community to have diversity, there needs to be mutiple pathways for that diversity to be experienced. The ideal of an inclusive art community is not about helping “those less fortunate than ourselves” but creating an opportunity where all levels, types, and purposes of creativity can exist without judgement or hierarchy.”

Some Lismore creatives are still recovering from the 2022 flood and storm events, and others express a desire to assist with reinvention of the centre

- Reflecting on some of the challenges for their practice/ organisation, Lismore respondents highlighted difficulties relating to flood recovery, including an inability to prioritise creative work, housing affordability and a lack of creative spaces.
- One shared: “my biggest challenge to my practice right now, and over the past 2+ years, is flood recovery absorbing all my time and energy. My focus is and has been to reestablish my home environment, once I have achieved this I will be free to set up a studio and start making again.”
- Others noted they struggled with travel distances and availability of public transport, their mental and physical health, and their awareness and understanding of funding bodies and application processes.
- Many want to participate in community recovery and activation, with one saying that they “hope to be a part of Lismore’s reinventing of itself into a creative cultural hub for the region.”
- Artists express creative ideas for Lismore’s flood zone. One artist and community worker based in Lismore suggested, “The Arts Ark. A huge barge that houses exhibitions and floats when the area floods. The likely hood of there being another big flood in Lismore is 100%. The Arts Ark would be a significant tourist attraction, and also be an emergency floating headquarters in the middle of town for the first responders.”
- Another suggested, “Not new, but collaborate together to beautify flood affected communities - get artists working with community groups to, as an example, mosaic a building using discarded tiles and tell a story that could be about the flood, our indigenous history or represent the natural environment. Art as therapy and make it ours and reduce the anxiety, stress and negativity about so many things!”

Creative audiences in Lismore

Lismore audiences participate in a wide range of arts activities and experiences, and they want to see more community gathering and collaboration.

- A third (32%) of all Northern Rivers audience or community members live in Lismore LGA, while two thirds (64%) of all respondents have visited Lismore to participate in cultural events in the last 12 months. This rate of visitation is one of the highest in the region, though not as high as Byron (70%).
- Lismore audiences have participated in a variety of artforms, including visual arts and crafts (83%), contemporary music (72%), festivals (67%), Aboriginal arts and culture (65%), creative industries (e.g. design, film etc.) (58%) and more. They are more likely to have participated in most artforms, compared to the Northern Rivers average.
- For Lismore residents, the top 3 barriers impacting audience development and engagement with the arts in the region are:
 - having other priorities (51%)
 - awareness or not knowing what’s on (50%)
 - and financial barriers (48%).
- Lismore audiences are more likely to experience financial barriers, compared to the rest of the region (48% vs 44%), or having other priorities for their time (51% vs 42%).
- Looking ahead, the top 3 types of experiences that Lismore audiences want to see more of are:
 - gatherings and community events (60%)
 - public art, murals, street art (58%)
 - performances and exhibitions (both 55%)

- Lismore respondents suggested that attendance in the region could be improved in a variety of ways, including: more regular programming, better promotion of one-off experiences, more high-quality events and experiences, improving accessibility, and more partnerships with organisations from outside the region.
- Residents also suggested that more collaboration with local practitioners and audiences could encourage participation, with one noting that “the best way to grow an audience is to join them rather than ask them to come to you. Popular local events, such as the Thursday markets in Lismore, could be the site of arts performances, or the subject of public art-making.”
- Other concrete suggestions from Lismore respondents include:
 - “A permanent busking stage in the CBD of Lismore. A DJ set up for Friday evenings off one of the shops balconies to bring a vibe to the street and encourage people to the CBD for dinner and drinks. Create a music and food scene of a Friday.”
 - “Updating the Back Alley Gallery... There are a large amount of people who visit this area daily! However, so many of the works need to be touched up or covered completely (due to damage/vandalism). It is an interesting and unique space for Lismore that deserves some love and attention. I would absolutely love to be able to share my skills with this project.”

Opportunities for creativity in Lismore

Lismore’s creative community are passionate about creative space, and how it can reinvigorate the community.

- Looking ahead, Lismore residents’ top 3 priorities for enhancing the Northern Rivers creative sector are:
 - establishing new creative spaces (45%)
 - building audiences and attracting visitation (42%)
 - and reinvigorating existing cultural spaces (42%).
- Space is an issue across the region, and particularly in places where real estate is affected by floods, growing populations and rising property prices. 40% of Lismore residents are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with venues for performing, exhibiting or selling work, while a third (32%) feel neutrally. Meanwhile, 40% feel neutrally about spaces for making work, and 29% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.
- Compared to elsewhere in the region, Lismore respondents were more likely to prioritise reinvigorating existing cultural spaces, and creating disaster-resilient resources and supports.
- When asked to share a big idea for the region, many respondents from Lismore put forward ideas for creative venues and art spaces. For instance:
 - “Before the flood, before Resilient Lismore moved into the old Trevan ford building, I fantasised about it becoming a community arts centre. I can still see it now, as a Resilient Arts Centre maybe? (except i hate that word resilient...) A fully grassroots community-owned, community-led, non-hierarchical, non-service org, wild, punk art school, experimental play space, with awesome art supplies and tools.”

- “An artist hub with workshop spaces and studios in Nimbin, a town with a high proportion of artists, would create a wonderful opportunity for artists in the heart of the region.”
- “Creative arts precinct in Lismore that offers affordable workspaces for artists ~ so many don’t own real estate.”
- “Community studio spaces in the cbd that are alive and accessible regularly. Paid staff on hand to support users to access resources and keep the spaces breathing, clean, and energised.”
- There were many suggestions for a creative retail space with hospitality offerings, for instance:
 - “A shopfront for arts and business to be able to display their activities and services open to the public where they can explore opportunities and see upcoming events. This is to be a physical shop that also has a cafe.”
 - “I would like to see a creative space that is also a retail outlet in the cbd. A place where people can see artist workshops and sit and have a coffee and purchase artworks.”
- Residents also indicated dissatisfaction with arts projects funding, with 50% feeling neutral and 40% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Thinking about ensuring that Northern Rivers creativity thrives into the future, Lismore respondents highlighted the need for continued and sustainable funding, community collaboration and provision of inclusive/ accessible support. One noted “the role of Arts NR is vital. It requires overarching investment from all players, including all levels of government and collaboration with the arts community.”

About this Fact Sheet

This fact sheet was prepared by Patternmakers for Arts Northern Rivers. It includes publicly available statistics, along with results from the WHO ARE WE Northern Rivers Creative Sector Mapping Survey.

For more information about the project, including the full-length regional report and other resources, visit <https://www.artsnorthernrivers.com.au/>

For any questions, please contact:

- Arts Northern Rivers at info@artsnorthernrivers.com.au
- Patternmakers at info@thepatternmakers.com.au

Key data sources:

- WHO WE ARE: Northern Rivers Creative Sector Mapping Survey 2024
- LGA-level population statistics: ABS, <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area>
- LGA featured characteristics: Visit NSW, <https://www.visitnsw.com/destinations/north-coast>
- Cultural and creative employment: ABS analysis produced for Patternmakers, 2024

Image credit:

- Map: Regional Development Australia, Community Data App. Source: <https://app.remplan.com.au/northernrivers/community/summary>

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