ARTS FUNDING 101

We feed the garden,
the garden feeds us.

This work was commissioned by Creative New Zealand
Toi Aotearoa to illuminate the arts funding ecosystem
in Aotearoa New Zealand and their place within it

Version 3 – updated November 2026

You wanna know one of the best feelings in the world? Experiencing an incredible performance.

You rub your eyes in the light and turn to the person next to you in astonishment. Your mind is whirring, your heart is pounding. Anything feels possible.

Or maybe you're on a date. The show has pulled all your emotional strings, and now you're buzzing and sparking and opening up. Or maybe you walk out feeling powerful and strong, proud of where you're from and who you are.



This kind of community wellbeing is essential, like jobs, housing and healthcare. It's a light in the dark in difficult times. It's happiness, identity, hope, new ideas - stuff that makes life make sense, and feel good.

The show you've just seen didn't come out of nowhere. It was made with dedication by actors, dancers, designers and musicians. Someone did the lighting, production, the costumes, ran the venue. There were weeks of rehearsals, months of work for the choreographer and the playwright, years and years of dance training and music lessons and everything else.

The show was a joy to make, but it was work. Hours and hours, across a complex network of skilled practitioners. And how do all these people get paid? Let's take a look at the ecosystem of arts funding in Aotearoa New Zealand...

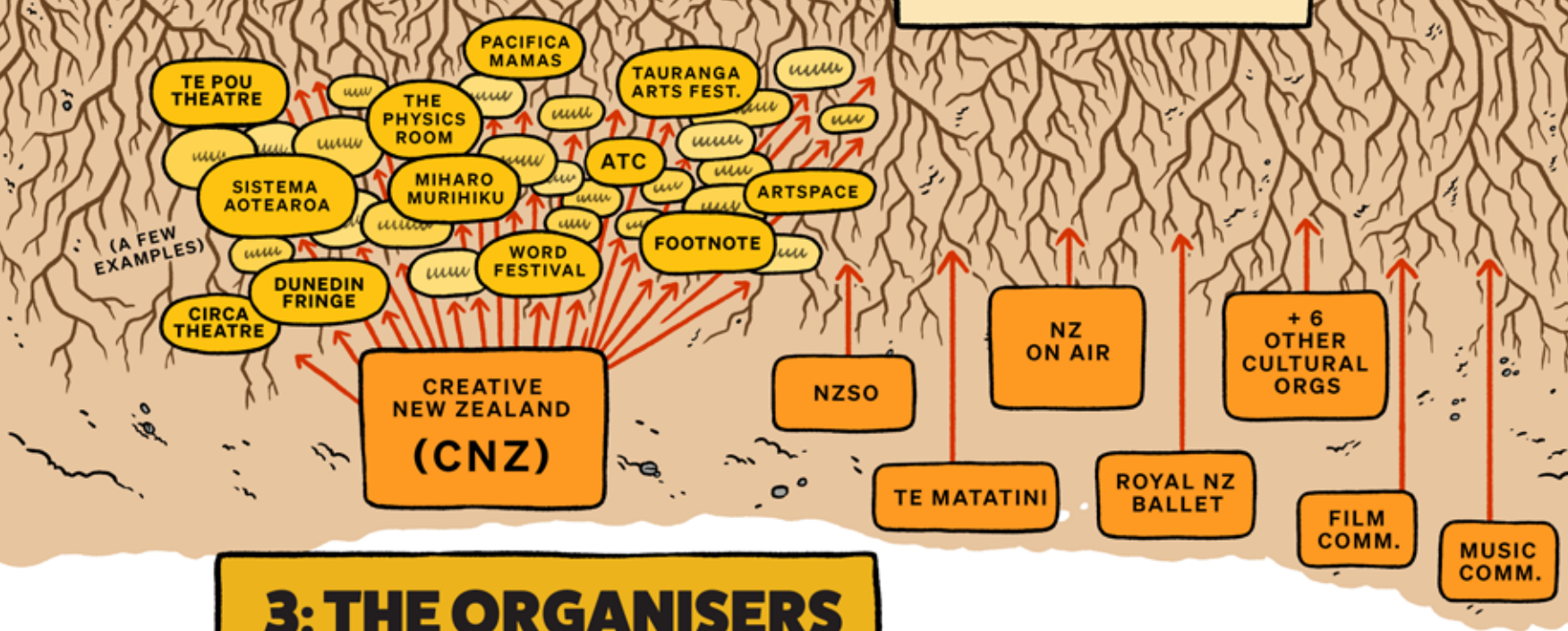
1: THE WORK

Imagine a garden, full of delicious fruit and beautiful nourishing veges, as well as flowers and trees and healing plants of all different shapes and sizes. Some are tall and sturdy, while others are smaller, still finding the light. Imagine that's all of New Zealand's creative works - our books, music, visual art, craft, dance, films, theatre.

2: THE MAKERS

Then imagine the people whose job it is to make them – our artists, our writers, our dancers and carvers and singers and sculptors – they're the trunks of the trees and the stems of the flowers.

(And here's our show for example)



3: THE ORGANISERS

Then, below the ground, less visible, is an interconnected root system of organisations and structures that help make the work possible. Some are smaller, like local galleries, small venues or grassroots community groups, and some are bigger – for example, the Auckland Theatre Company, the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra or the big city galleries.

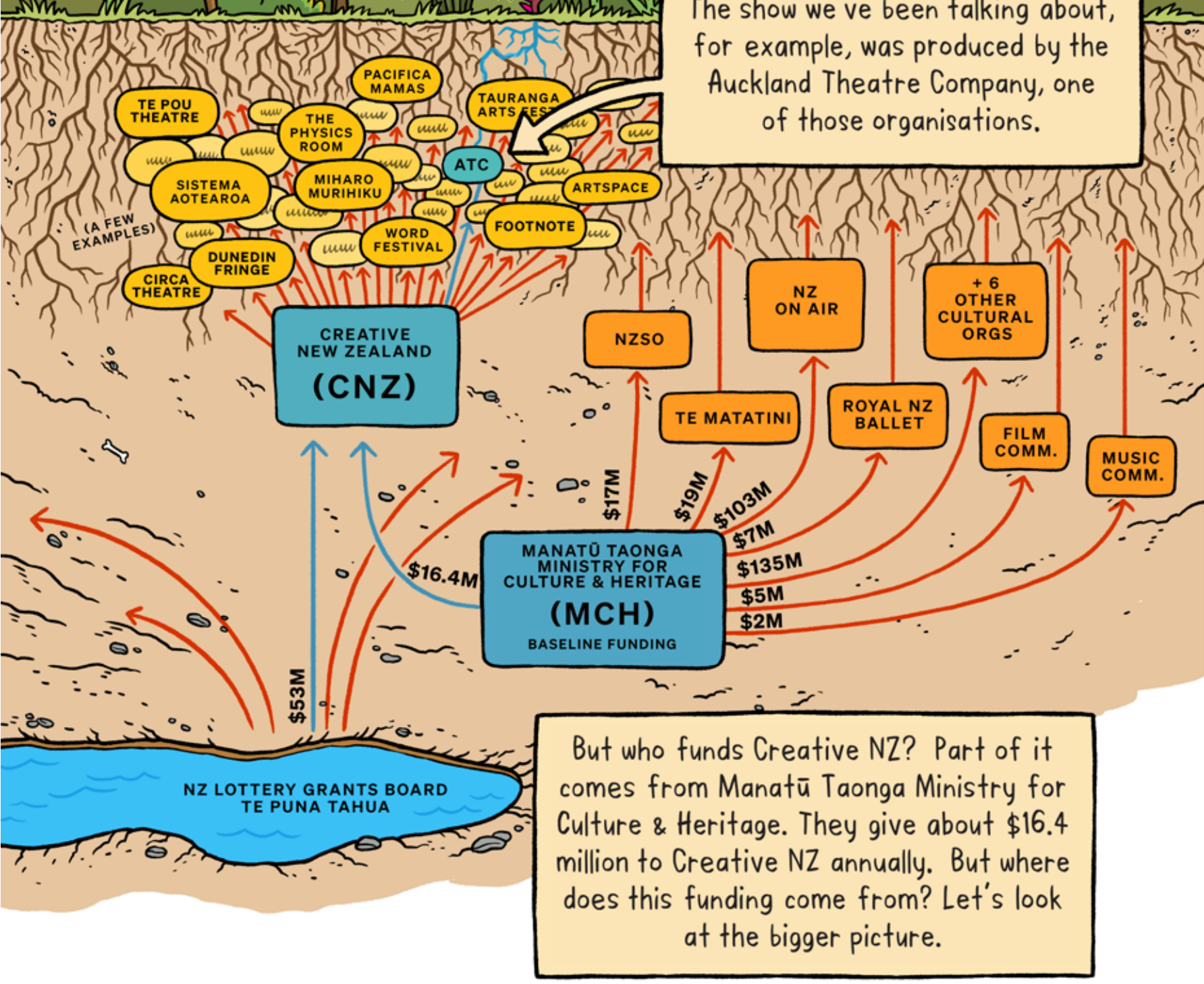
Then, bigger than them, are some national bodies. Some are producers, like the NZ Symphony Orchestra and Te Matatini, and some are funders like Creative NZ, NZ Film Commission and NZ On Air.

This is the **infrastructure of creativity** - things like venues, training, touring, organising. All the day to day legwork that makes presenting creative work possible.

Not every single piece of creative work is directly funded through these organisations, but they're all part of a wider creative community and industry.

In the last financial year, Creative New Zealand contributed funding to more than 160 organisations, as well as supporting the projects of more than 350 artists through its short-term grants programme. Around 1,800 local arts projects were also funded through the Creative Communities Scheme. (This picture will look different in the future as CNZ moves into partnering for regional funding across the country.)

The show we've been talking about, for example, was produced by the Auckland Theatre Company, one of those organisations.



But who funds Creative NZ? Part of it comes from Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture & Heritage. They give about $16.4 million to Creative NZ annually. But where does this funding come from? Let's look at the bigger picture.

4: THE FUNDERS

PACIFICA MAMAS
TE POU THEATRE
THE PHYSICS ROOM
TAURANGA ARTS FEST.
ATC
SISTEMA AOTEAROA
MIHARO MURIHIKU
ARTSPACE
(A FEW EXAMPLES)
WORD FESTIVAL
FOOTNOTE
DUNEDIN FRINGE
CIRCA THEATRE

CREATIVE NEW ZEALAND (CNZ)

NZSO
NZ ON AIR
+ 6 OTHER CULTURAL ORGS
TE MATATINI
ROYAL NZ BALLET
FILM COMM.
MUSIC COMM.

$17M
$19M
$103M
$7M
$135M
$5M
$2M
$16.4M

MANATŪ TAONGA MINISTRY FOR CULTURE & HERITAGE (MCH)
BASELINE FUNDING

$53M
$461M
$40M
$500-600M

SPONSORSHIPS
PHILANTHROPY
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
NZ LOTTERY GRANTS BOARD TE PUNA TAHUA
CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

(99.7% goes elsewhere)

Central government funding flows through the Ministry. It's one of the funding sources in this next layer down – the water that feeds the organising roots that grow the work.

Then there's the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board Te Puna Tahua, which distributes the profits made from Lotto NZ gambling products back into the country. It provides about $53 million a year to Creative NZ to distribute, as well as funding sports, film, and other great stuff in the community.

There are also local councils around the country – funding community events, cultural festivals, local galleries and libraries, public art and more. They collectively contribute between $500-600 million each year.

Then there's philanthropy (private giving, community trusts, foundations and bequests) contributing about $40 million a year.

(A FEW EXAMPLES)

TE POU THEATRE
PACIFICA MAMAS
THE PHYSICS ROOM
TAURANGA ARTS FEST.
SISTEMA AOTEAROA
MIHARO MURIHIKU
ATC
ARTSPACE
WORD FESTIVAL
FOOTNOTE
DUNEDIN FRINGE
CIRCA THEATRE

CREATIVE NEW ZEALAND (CNZ)

NZSO
NZ ON AIR
+ 6 OTHER CULTURAL ORGS
TE MATATINI
ROYAL NZ BALLET
FILM COMM.
MUSIC COMM.

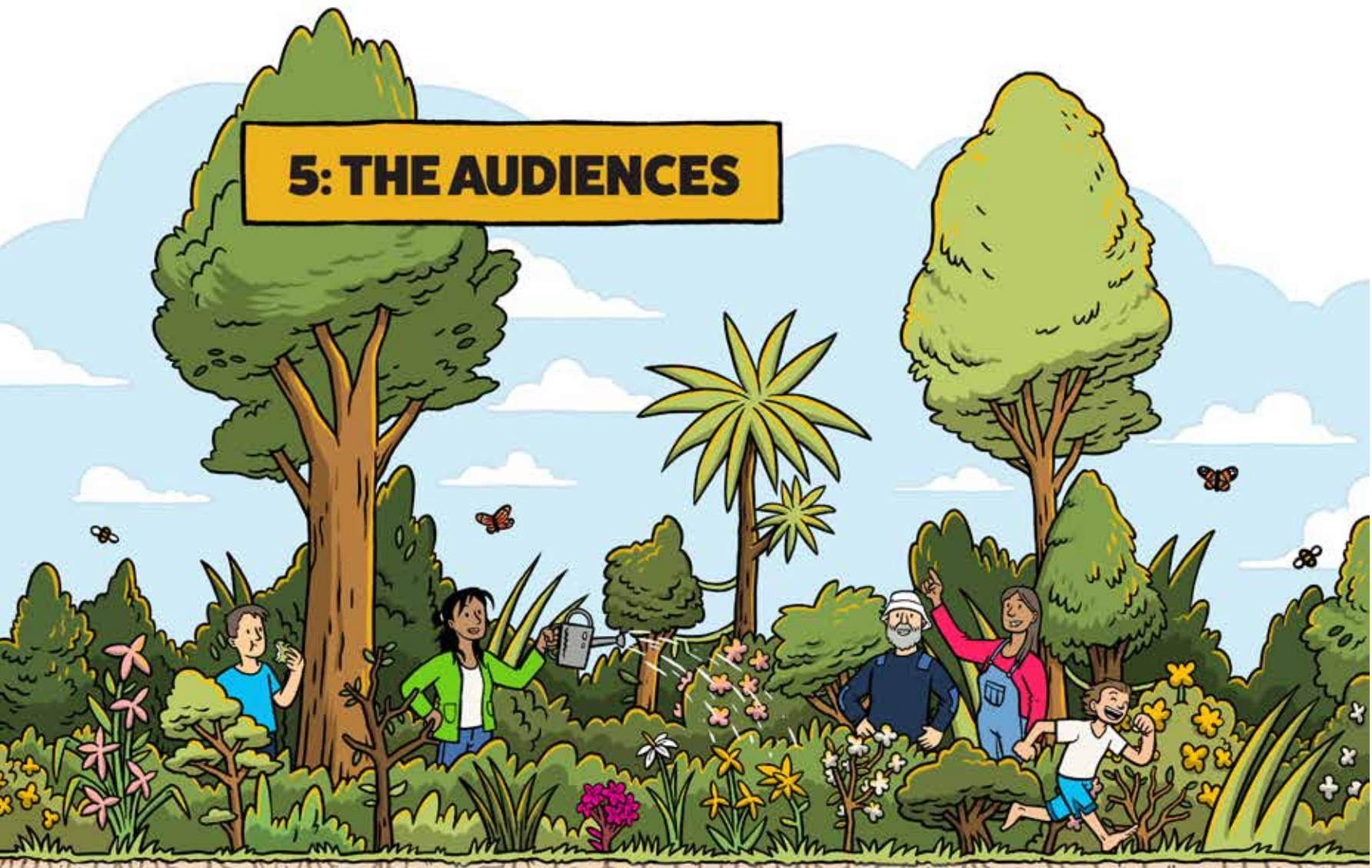
$17M
$19M
$103M
$7M
$135M
$5M
$2M
$16.4M
$53M
$461M
$40M
$500-600M

MANATŪ TAONGA MINISTRY FOR CULTURE & HERITAGE (MCH)
BASELINE FUNDING

SPONSORSHIPS
PHILANTHROPY
NZ LOTTERY GRANTS BOARD TE PUNA TAHUA
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Finally, the biggest pool is central government. It spends money on everything – roads, schools, hospitals, superannuation etc. About 0.3% of total expenditure – about $461 million per year – goes to the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. Of that $16.4 million goes to Creative NZ.

5: THE AUDIENCES



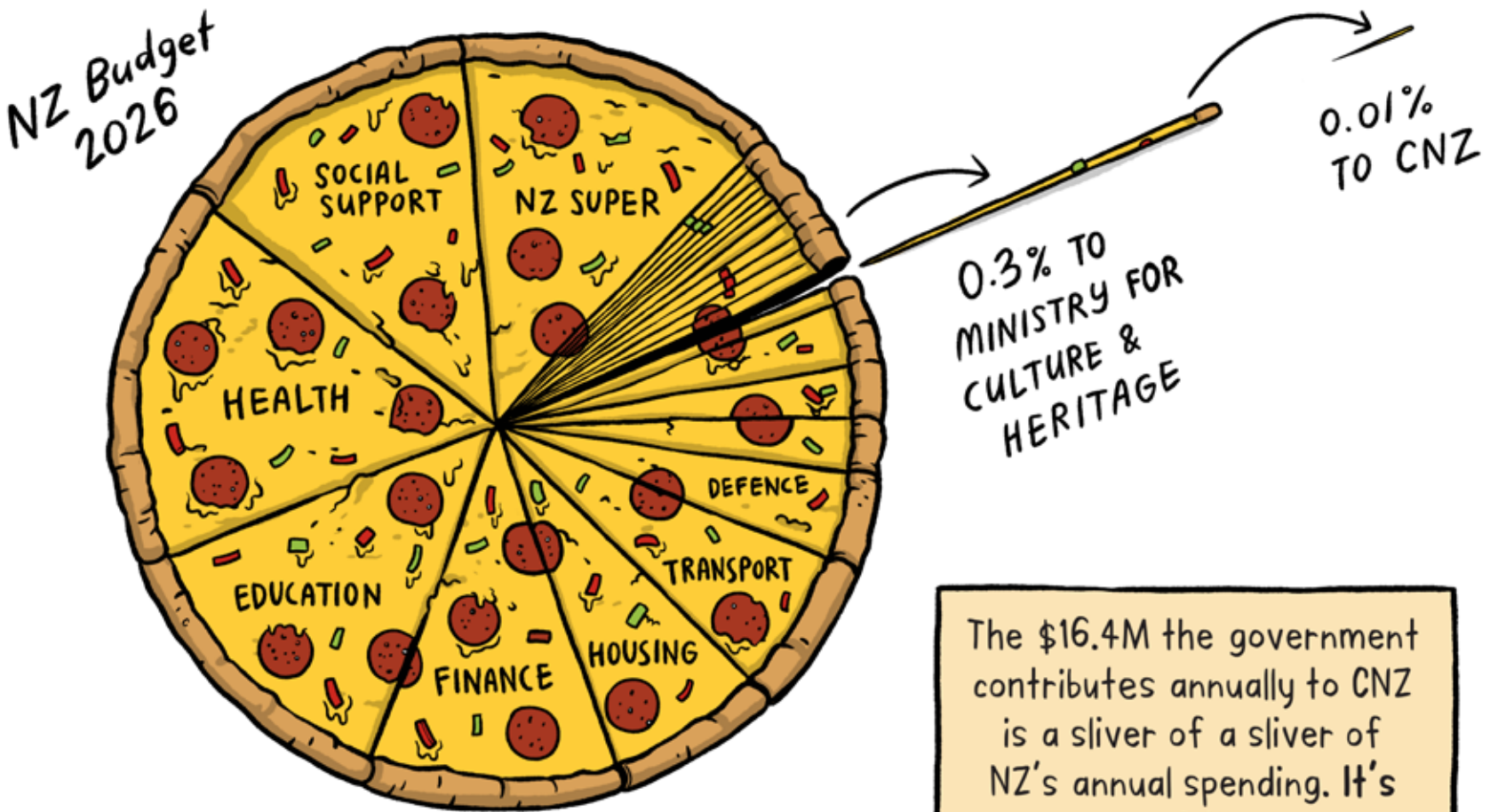
And, of course – going back above ground – there's the audience, who get to enjoy and be nourished by the garden. They water it – they buy tickets to gigs, buy artworks, attend community festivals – and that helps make the garden more beautiful and fruitful.

All the elements combine to grow the garden: artists, audiences, organisers and funders.

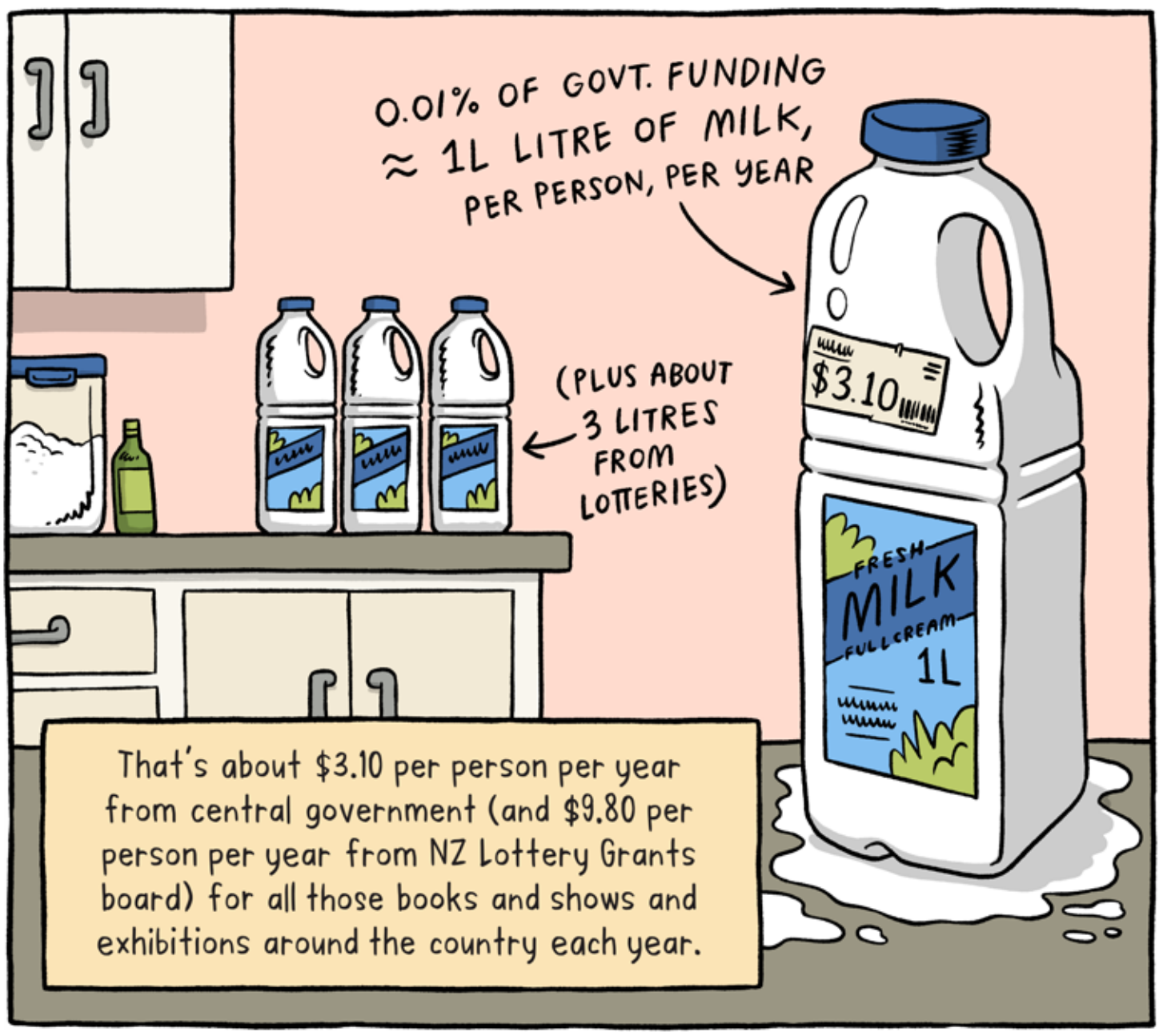
Watering it from above can't sustain the garden on its own. Without healthy, fertile soil the ecosystem will wither and die.

6: THE NUMBERS

So, how does the garden stay alive? Funding.
To be blunt: money is what makes creating, producing and presenting creative work possible. And how does that work?
As an example, let's zoom in to look at the picture for Creative NZ.
CNZ's funding is 75% from Lotteries, 25% from central government.

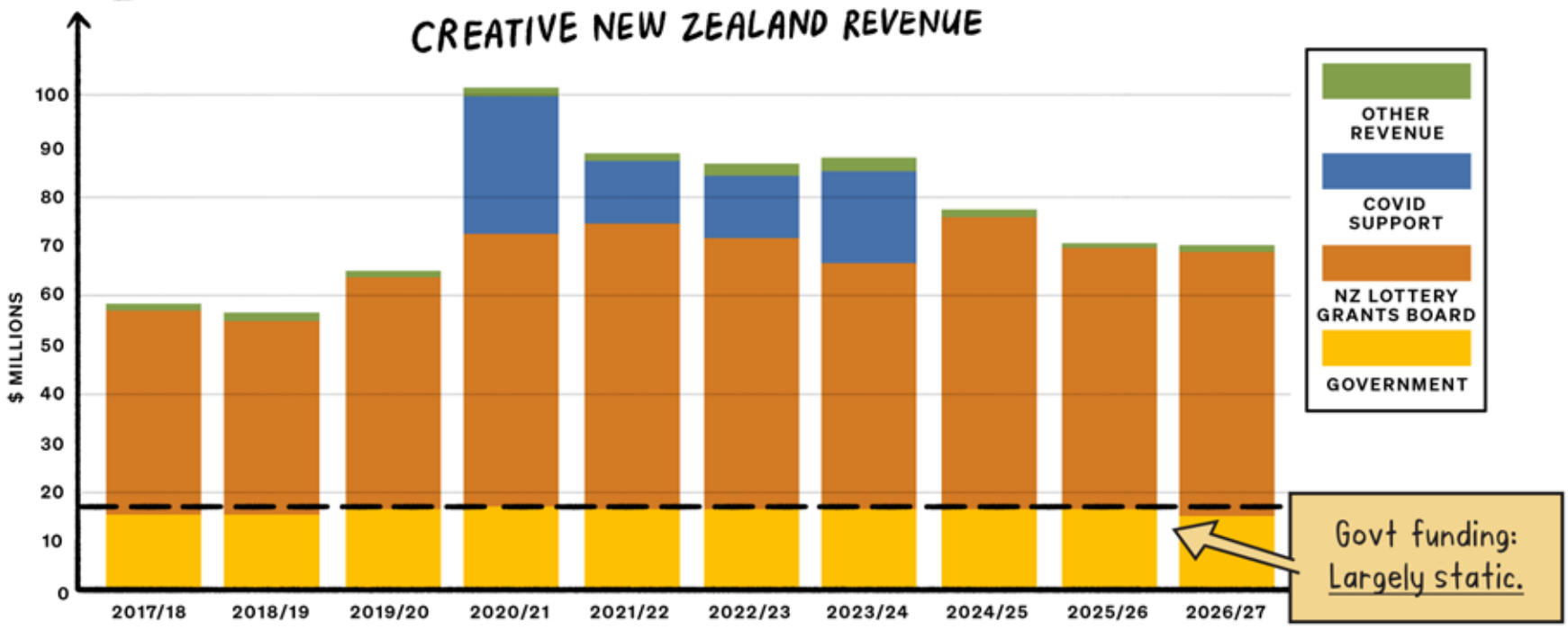


The $16.4M the government contributes annually to CNZ is a sliver of a sliver of NZ's annual spending. **It's only 0.01% of NZ spending** – barely a rounding error.



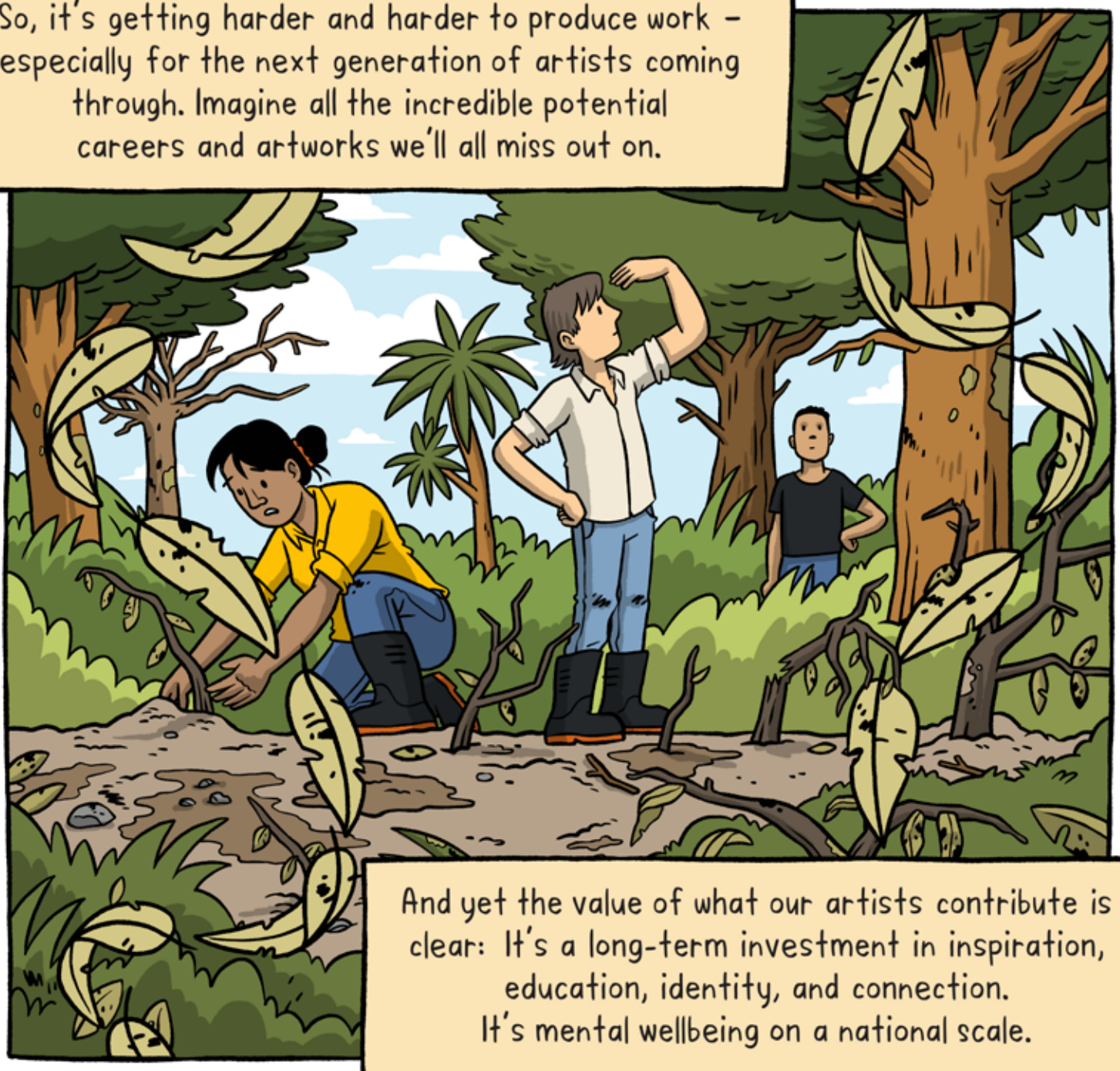
That's about $3.10 per person per year from central government (and $9.80 per person per year from NZ Lottery Grants board) for all those books and shows and exhibitions around the country each year.

While government funding for CNZ has remained largely static for twenty years, Lotteries funding has increased over time. In that time inflation also means the cost of putting work on has massively increased, and our population has increased by 29% - that's nearly an extra 1.2 million people to reach.



Demand for funding now far outweighs the amount CNZ is able to distribute. In the last financial year, CNZ had requests for over $129 million in short-term grant funding, but just over $12 million to distribute.

So, it's getting harder and harder to produce work - especially for the next generation of artists coming through. Imagine all the incredible potential careers and artworks we'll all miss out on.



And yet the value of what our artists contribute is clear: It's a long-term investment in inspiration, education, identity, and connection. It's mental wellbeing on a national scale.

Artists' work helps us figure out who we are, what we're all about. It fosters community bonding, pride and our ability to solve problems. It makes us laugh, cry and think. It's the magic.

And it has wider economic impacts too: it builds jobs and brings our cities to life - people travel, buy dinner, make a weekend of it. **In 2025 the creative sector contributed $18.5 billion to NZ's GDP.**

And that impact happens on a global scale too. Travel anywhere in the world and tell people you're from NZ and you'll hear the same replies:

"OH! LORD OF THE RINGS! THE HAKA! FLIGHT OF THE CONCHORDS! LORDE! TAIKA! PARRIS GOEBEL! BENEE!"

メガマート
24時間営業
サロンベル
ラーメン
カメラ

This is the face we wear to the world: our beautiful land, Māori culture, our dry sense of humour, our stories.

But you can't just fund the established stuff. Just as important is the community level – the first exhibition, the midweek open mic night, the bedroom novelist, the young artists trying something new and brave. In short: the tall trees in the garden have to grow up from somewhere.



There's no Lorde without school talent shows and community festival stages, no Te Matatini excellence without hundreds of community events around the country, and no Taika or Flight of the Conchords without years of experimenting at local theatres. **Are the next generation coming through going to get these same opportunities?**

So yes, we as the audience can water the garden more, but the biggest change we can all make is with collective action. Together we can influence the biggest pools of funding by sending a message that art, culture and creativity are important investments for community wellbeing.



This funding comes from our taxes and rates, so it's steered by what we tell central and local government. And the majority of New Zealanders agree that the arts should receive public funding. So we **can** call for more fertile soil.

Politicians and decision makers act on the national mood – if the mood says we want better arts funding, then that means they can strengthen the whole ecosystem. And that, in turn, means more shows, more jobs, better books, more films, bigger festivals, stronger galleries, new ideas, new voices – at every level.

And that's great for the artists – that talented network of experts involved in our show can get paid fairly, and then all those artists can have more stages and more opportunities to try things too.

But the biggest benefit isn't just for the artists, it's for the audience – all of us. More work and stronger work means more minds blown, more hearts pounding, more ideas and inspiration, here in Aotearoa New Zealand and all around the world.

More things to cheer about, laugh about, think about.

More pride. More connection. More joy.

Written and illustrated by Toby Morris with Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa

References:

- Ecosystem numbers
  Manatū Taonga | Ministry for Culture & Heritage:
  https://www.mch.govt.nz/publications/budget-2026
- Philanthropy dollar amount
  JB were | New Zealand support Report:
  https://www.jbwere.co.nz/assets/Philanthropic-Services/jbwere-nz-support-report-digital.pdf?hash=67bc0a12988dc0f22613df9dfb30bf01fb922867
- Local Authority Financial Statistics - Culture category
  Stats NZ | Infoshare - Culture category:
  https://infoshare.stats.govt.nz/
- Spending pie graph
  Interest | Budget 2026/27 - Summary of all spending plans:
  https://www.interest.co.nz/public-policy/138761/budget-202627-summary-all-spending-plans
- Government expenditure graph
  Budget 2026 | Summary of Inititiatives - Budget 2026 - 28 May 2026:
  https://budget.govt.nz/budget/2026/summary-initiatives/index.htm
- Creative sector $18.5 billion GDP figure
  Manatū Taonga | Ministry for Culture & Heritage | Infometrics sector profiles 2025:
  https://www.mch.govt.nz/publications/infometrics-sector-profiles-2025
- Artworks in exhibition image inspired by Lissy Robinson-Cole, Rudi Robinson-Cole, from Wharenui Harikoa, 2020-2024. Permission of the artists.
- New Zealanders agree that the arts should receive public funding
  Creative New Zealand | New Zealanders and the Arts—Ko Aotearoa Me ōna Toi 2023:
  https://creativenz.govt.nz/development-and-resources/new-zealanders-and-the-arts----ko-aotearoa-me-ona-toi

The dollar figures in this resource are taken from publicly available information and are not intended to reflect every possible source of funding for the arts. For example, there is no publicly available information on how much corporate sponsorship is directed to the arts sector annually. We have endeavored to use the latest information available at the time of publication.

This explainer was first produced in the 2024/25 financial year. Version 3 was updated for the 2026/27 financial year and published in November 2026.

References to 'last year' mean the 2025/26 financial year.