

Submission to the Australian Government: Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to consultation on Australia's next National Cultural Policy. I represent an independent disability-led policy and research initiative focused on equitable participation across professional, cultural, educational, and civic life.

This submission primarily relates to the consultation paper's focus on:

- Strong Cultural Infrastructure,
- Engaging the Audience,
- accessibility and participation,
- and the role of technology in shaping future cultural engagement.

The consultation paper recognises that Australia's future cultural policy must respond to changing technologies, evolving participation models, and barriers affecting access and engagement across the cultural sector.

I submits that one significant but underdeveloped area within current cultural policy is participation infrastructure itself.

While Australia's cultural sector has rapidly expanded its digital distribution, promotion, and online communication capacity, many forms of cultural participation remain heavily organised around assumptions of physical attendance, stable capacity, travel, and synchronous engagement. Even where remote participation is offered, it is often treated as secondary, passive, or observational rather than as a legitimate form of active participation and contribution.

This creates structural barriers for many Australians, including people with:

- disability,
- chronic illness,
- fluctuating capacity,
- mobility restrictions,
- caregiving responsibilities,
- sensory limitations,
- and geographic isolation.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, approximately 596,800 Australians aged five years and over do not leave home as often as they would like because of disability or conditions¹.

Despite this, participation across many areas of cultural life continues to depend heavily on in-person attendance. This is particularly visible across festivals, conferences, exhibitions, performances, public programming, professional development events, and other forms of cultural engagement where visibility and attendance remain closely tied to participation and opportunity.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that hybrid and remote participation across cultural sectors is both technologically achievable and publicly valuable. During this period, many cultural organisations adopted:

- livestreaming,

- recorded sessions,
- digital panels,
- remote attendance,
- and hybrid engagement pathways.

For many disabled and homebound Australians, this represented a rare expansion of cultural accessibility and participation. However, much of this infrastructure was later removed or devalued as institutions returned to assumptions that meaningful participation primarily occurs in person.

I submits that future cultural policy should recognise remote participation infrastructure as part of contemporary cultural infrastructure.

Remote participation should not be framed solely as emergency contingency or secondary convenience, but as an important mechanism for expanding cultural participation, audience reach, and sector sustainability.

This aligns directly with the goals of:

- broadening cultural participation,
- strengthening audience engagement,
- improving accessibility,
- and ensuring Australia's cultural sector remains responsive to changing social and technological conditions.

Recommendations for the next National Cultural Policy:

- recognise remote participation as a legitimate form of cultural engagement,
- establish hybrid accessibility standards for publicly funded cultural events,
- support meaningful remote participation pathways across festivals, conferences, exhibitions, and professional development, including opportunities for active engagement rather than passive observation,
- expand accessibility frameworks beyond physical infrastructure alone,
- and recognise participation barriers associated with fluctuating capacity and restricted ability to consistently attend in person.

More flexible participation systems would not only benefit disabled communities, but also regional Australians, carers, low-income participants, and others unable to reliably engage through conventional attendance models.

A future-focused cultural policy should recognise that meaningful cultural participation can occur across multiple modes of engagement, including remote and hybrid participation. Equitable participation requires cultural systems flexible enough to include people across diverse realities of health, energy, geography, and capacity.

1. Pinero de Plaza, M. A. (2021). Making the invisible visible: Exploring the experiences of frail homebound and bedridden people: Preliminary research report for the community. Flinders University.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14417987>