

Australia's National Cultural Policy

Feedback Submission presented by Rebecca Kirwan May 2026

As an independent filmmaker, workshop leader at Bus Stop Films, mentor, and volunteer across many projects and organisations, I feel very strongly that arts access needs to move beyond simply inviting disabled and neurodivergent people into spaces. We need genuine pathways into leadership, employment, creative decision-making and long-term careers across the arts and screen industries.

One of the most meaningful parts of my work has been witnessing what happens when people are given trust, creative ownership, flexibility and support. Through my mentoring work and through Bus Stop Films, I have seen participants, often underestimated, completely transform when they are supported in safe and inclusive creative environments where their voices are valued. Many go on to create extraordinary work, step into leadership roles, gain employment opportunities, or begin to see themselves as artists and storytellers for the first time.

As a 48-year-old neurodivergent woman who has lived with severe anxiety and associated conditions all of my life, I understand how difficult it can be to navigate industries and systems not designed with accessibility, flexibility or different ways of thinking in mind. There is often a significant mental health cost in continually trying to fit into structures that were never designed to include us meaningfully or sustainably.

I have had to create my own pathways as a filmmaker, coming from neither a wealthy nor industry-connected background, and this has impacted my health, earning capacity and access to career progression opportunities. Despite this, I remain deeply passionate about filmmaking and the profound way storytelling can shape our world. Storytelling is one of the oldest ways we connect, share and preserve lived experience across cultures and communities, both within Australia and globally.

Through my work in inclusive creative spaces over recent years, including at Bus Stop Films, I have continued building meaningful career progression. This has been shaped through persistence, lived experience and a deep commitment to work I care about, alongside a gradual opening of opportunities within the industry that were always present, but not always accessible.

I also believe we need more accessible ways for creatives to connect with industry that do not rely solely on traditional networking models. For many autistic and neurodivergent people, these environments can be anxiety-provoking and exhausting, often becoming barriers rather than bridges. Expanding how connection and collaboration happen is essential for genuine inclusion.

This extends to how opportunities themselves are accessed, including job advertisements written in plain language, accessible training programs and funding applications that are not overly long or unnecessarily complex. Moving from an emerging filmmaker into a mid-career filmmaker remains one of the biggest challenges for people pursuing filmmaking professionally. The industry is notoriously competitive, narrow, selective and often

inaccessible for those who are not from financially privileged backgrounds. This current model needs to evolve.

A key part of future sustainability also lies in funding reform that actively encourages private investment. Stronger partnerships between government, arts organisations and private investors are essential, including targeted tax incentives that make it viable and attractive for the private sector to invest in inclusive, disability-led and diverse creative work. Without this, many innovative projects remain underfunded or reliant on short-term grant cycles, limiting growth and long-term sustainability.

There is also a need for fair and flexible income conditions for creatives working freelance or on short-term contracts, as well as for those accessing government support systems such as the Disability Support Pension, so participation in the arts becomes financially viable and does not come at the cost of stability or wellbeing.

I can also only work when my health allows, and at times this may mean I only have capacity for ten hours per week. The current expectations across the film and television industry are often incompatible with this reality, which has meant I have needed to reshape production methods and schedules around my disabilities. I feel fortunate that I have been able to streamline my filmmaking processes to the point where I can shoot a short film in two days maximum. However, as I move toward directing a feature film, the realities become far more challenging, as feature productions traditionally require significantly longer and more intensive schedules.

I am currently exploring how I can shape directing processes and production management structures in ways that accommodate disability while still maintaining professional and creative outcomes. This includes ideas such as eight-hour shoot days and filming schedules built around two days on and one day off. While this is largely unheard of within the Australian screen industry, it demonstrates that alternative production models are possible when accessibility and sustainability are prioritised.

My concern is how these models can realistically be funded within current systems. However, I also hope this highlights the very real systemic barriers many disabled creatives face. Disability should not exclude people from pursuing the work that gives them purpose, identity and contribution to community.

Commercially, it also makes sense to encourage meaningful and diverse storytelling through tax incentives and investment reform. Over time, this creates pathways for disabled creatives to gain experience, become experts within their fields and contribute to sustainable commercial models including streaming, international distribution and paid content platforms.

Again, I want to reinforce that there remains a significant lack of sustainable pathways for disabled creatives. Too often opportunities are short term or tokenistic, requiring people to continually prove their value within inaccessible systems. Inclusion must be embedded from the outset, alongside stronger support for freelance, peer-led and community-based creative practice.

Within film and television, funding structures can still favour narrow ideas of who gets to create and succeed. This excludes many voices before they can participate fully. I do not believe this is a sustainable model for a genuinely diverse cultural sector.

Mentoring and community-led practice should also be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure. Arts and storytelling shape connection and belonging. When diverse stories are seen and valued, it strengthens both our industries and our communities. A truly inclusive cultural future is one where every story is genuinely supported to thrive.

I also believe that when governments and organisations seek feedback from communities, it is important that this consultation is meaningful and not treated as a symbolic gesture. Strong feedback loops, measurable outcomes and visible implementation of community recommendations are essential in building trust and creating genuine cultural change. When people can see their lived experiences reflected in policy outcomes, it strengthens both participation and belief in the systems intended to support them.

Disability culture is still deeply misunderstood in Australia. It is not only about access needs, but also identity, lived experience, creativity, resilience and alternative ways of seeing the world. To reflect this properly, disabled people must be able to share their stories directly within funded and respected cultural spaces, truly aligning with the vision of “A Place for Every Story.”