Hello everyone. I am a white middle aged disabled man, wearing blue & black clothes, in my home studio in front of a bright orange blind. My pronouns are he/him. I am delighted to be with you all today.

Today to fit into your themes of co-creation and workforce inclusion, I'm going to reflect on:

- How creative disabled people in the UK are at last making a real impact
- I'll talk about how we can address everyday ableism and share a little about my own career in the creative industries as a disabled individual
- And I'll tell you about my current role as UK Arts Access Champion and the development of the national arts access scheme - All In - which I hope will offer huge benefits to local authority-run cultural venues

Disability in 2025 has been more visible than it has ever been in UK culture.

We saw the first disabled character in our leading tv drama *Doctor Who* played by the brilliant disabled actress Ruth Madeley in a wheelchair that could fire rockets.

And Kyla Harris, a disabled actor and writer starred in her own BAFTA nominated BBC sitcom *We Might Regret this.*

Right now, we have a disabled actor Francesca Mills playing Ophelia in Hamlet at the National Theatre, and across the UK, our national museums are re-evaluating their collections, and for the first time foregrounding previously hidden stories of disability, driven by a new generation of disabled curators.

None of this happened by chance and has been decades in the making. And disabled people are now firmly part of the national cultural conversation in the UK…..right?

Appearances can be deceptive and as we all know in today's world, everything can turn on a dime.

Our mainstream arts organisations remain firmly unrepresentative of a society where 22% of UK population declare a disability. According to Arts Council England data, disabled people make up 10% of audiences, 9% of the creative workforce & 12% of boards.

So there remains disparity, inequality and discimination. I'll have more to say on those figures later but let's take a moment to celebrate what progress **there is** and how far we've come.

Lets travel back to 2012 when London hosted the Olympic & Paralympic Games, because that was a really pivotal moment. Back then there were no high profile disabled people in our national culture and certainly no high profile disabled arts leaders.

Whilst we could just about access theatres and museums, our stories were not being told on stage or in museum display cases.

There was a false perception that everything must be ok for disabled people because our Paralympians were winning lots of medals and being promoted as role models. This conveniently ignored the fact that considerable sustained investment had been placed into disabled sport over decades. Last year's brilliant medal haul in Paris was paid for by £68m investment by UK sport. Imagine what we could all do if that figure was invested in disability arts?

Not long after 2012, I began sharing my own experiences of ableism in the cultural sector. I had enjoyed a high profile career in the arts and as one of the first disabled presenters of British children's television.

I was one of the first disabled music and arts documentary makers, and later became the first disabled person to run a major arts venue.

I had a pretty good run with lots of firsts, but all the way through my career I encountered **glass ceilings.**

And all those *firsts*, the first disabled *this*, the first wheelchair user *that.* That is quite a common experience for disabled people across the board.

But I worry that each *"first"* demonstrates just how far **we**, as a society, have yet to go in integrating the disabled **experience** into our mainstream.

Yet all my career choices have been shaped by my disability. It's the single thread that binds everything I've done. And I've done a lot. Entirely dictated by the provision of wheelchair access.

Whether that was in 1980s tv studios where access was actually a useful by-product of camera manoeuvrability or when I opened the fully accessible-by-design Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama new-build venues where I was Creative Director in the 2010s.

But the majority of my career was spent in a time when there was fundamentally no value placed on the work of disabled creatives. Recognition, promotion and awards were impossible to come by. And I have to tell you **that** time spent in the mainstream, managing a severe disability alongside a full tilt career, was exhausting and unsustainable.

Because most disabled people need to work twice as hard as everyone else just to keep up. Looking back it was all pioneering stuff, but it came with a high cost.

The late 1980s were the first big moment for equal representation in Britain when broadcasters woke up to their lack of on-screen diversity.

My first job was presenting a children's show called *Boom!* on Channel 4 Television which was produced by Anne Wood - who went on to create *The Teletubbies* with worldwide success.

The format of Boom! was groundbreaking, integrating disabled children with their non-disabled peers at a time education for disabled kids was largely segregated, and we achieved weekly audiences of 3 million. *F*or a short time, I was everywhere - well everywhere on the **4** channels we had in those days.

At the same time, the Disability Arts Movement began their overtly political campaign for inclusion, for the adoption of the Social Model of disability, with their legendary slogan *"Nothing About us Without Us"*. The Social Model was a radically new way of thinking about disability - that it is societies' structures and environments that disable us, not our medical conditions. From that single political movement came the leading British disabled-led arts companies Graeae Theatre and Shape Arts, whose support of disabled artists have transformed the UK's cultural landscape.

Critical to their success was the early advocacy and sustained investment of the Arts Council of Great Britain as it then was. But disability arts throughout the 90s and into the early 2000s remained niche, cut off from the mainstream arts and the quality of work, inevitably was variable

Being a media figure, I was on the sidelines of that movement but during the 90s I wanted to make my own mark by becoming one of the very few disabled filmmakers. So I focused as a director and producer of tv arts documentaries, making films about artists I admired such as Derek Jarman, Bill Viola and Billy Mackenzie, Antony Gormley and Gerry Rafferty.

My disability was irrelevant to these films. It was in some ways immensely liberating. Yet of course it was always a subtext dictating what I could and couldn't do. Ultimately at that point there was little value placed on me as a disabled film maker and there were absolutely no career support mechanisms, no safety nets in place. Meanwhile my tv presenting career was brought to a premature halt in the mid '90s after an audition at the BBC, where I was told *"The Blue Peter audience are not yet ready for a disabled presenter".*

More recently, I had to withdraw from a recruitment process for the role of Chief Executive of a publicly funded theatre, Oxford Playhouse, without a single wheelchair accessible space in which I could be interviewed.

Twenty years apart, those experiences conveyed to me the same demoralising message. That both in attitudinal and access terms, we have a long way to go before disabled people can truly compete on a level playing field.

And that was the message of my first article in the arts press a decade ago.

When my tv career ended, I turned to my first love, the arts. I learned the ropes working as a Head of Performing Arts at Arts Council England in the Midlands, then worked in performing arts venues in Cardiff, Northampton and Oxford.

Attending industry conferences, I gradually noticed I was always the only disabled individual in the room, it became a lonely place to be.

Indeed at one theatre industry conference about inclusion, the venue itself was inaccessible, so denying access to the very people it was meant to empower! No co-creation there!

I found all too often disabled people were kept out of the diversity discussion. So rather than be complicit with an unfair system, or apply for senior roles I knew I had no chance of getting as there were no concessions like co-leadership models or working from home in place at that time, I decided to change the sector.

I did this with the help of a non-paid government role when I was appointed the first UK Disability Champion for Arts & Culture in 2018.

What was brilliant about it was that it offered a platform that gave me the opportunity to share my experiences, to start discussing the ableism I had endured in the industry that no one else was talking about. And that platform opened doors to influencing arts policy through my appointment to the boards of major organisations like Bafta, Arts Council England, Welsh National Opera and the Royal Shakespeare Company where I am now Deputy Chair.

But the very fast moving events of March 2020 when Covid descended upon us, left many disabled people deeply distressed and very isolated. So using my government platform and with the support of Jenny Sealey at Graeae Theatre, I created WeShallNotBeRemoved - the UK Disability Arts Alliance - to support disabled artists through the pandemic.

We doggedly reminded the cultural sector not to forget disabled people in the rush to online services. We sent open letters to the Government to pledge additional support for the arts and we did everything we could to maintain the profile of disabled artists whilst so many of us shielded and could not appear in public. This wasn't co-creation, this was disabled people doing it for ourselves.

With our hashtag EndAbleism, we attracted hundreds of members, undertook surveys and produced reports. But our enduring contribution was the *Seven Inclusive Principles* - a policy framework which helped shape UK culture to recover and rebuild inclusively. Our website and all our sector resources are still available to view at weshallnotbermoved.com.

This is where I'd identify the beginning of ableism becoming **a thing** that the non-disabled cultural mainstream in the UK could begin to understand. And looking across the sector now just 4 years later, I can clearly see our impact.

In that desperate moment of Covid we made arts organisations reconsider their approach to access and when they looked, they found it inadequate.

I couldn't be more pleased to see ableism now being discussed regularly; it was the theme of a recent Museum Association conference, there's access coordinators improving conditions for disabled talent in film, the arts workforce more readily self-identifying as disabled, and new and vital disabled artists receiving proper sustained career support. Meanwhile through my board work, I was able to shape Arts Council England's most inclusive ever strategy, *Lets Create*. That led to the establishment of the Disability Advisory Committee that I chair and ultimately to the inclusion of more disability focused companies like Sense Arts and Unlimited in the national portfolio during the last investment round in 2022. Yeah, the controversial one!

As I come to the end of my term on the National Council, I'm proud of our pandemic response, of being the only government body that demanded priority be given to inclusion of disabled people during the recovery.

And remember those arts council figures I quoted at the start? Proving even I can turn on a dime, I'm proud of those too as they demonstrated significant increases in the percentage of disabled people in the arts workforce, in board and in leadership positions in the Let's Create period! They're far from representative but my goodness they are lightyears ahead of where we were a decade ago.

Most recently the Arts Council has formally adopted the social model of disability and they are the first arms length body to do so. A huge win!

In my time on the board at the Royal Shakespeare Company, we've seen the first production of Richard III featuring a disabled actor in the title role.

At Bafta, we have overseen the transition of the globally recognised Film Awards to a fully accessible venue and seen disabled talent rewarded.

With Museums I've supported the development of *Curating for Change* which enables deaf, disabled, neurodiverse and learning disabled people to take their rightful place in the museum workforce and in so doing ensuring long- hidden disabled stories are finally being presented to the public.

This is co-creation in action. Empowering disabled people to make long overdue change. And all that representation is so important because we **all** begin our engagement with culture by being visitors or audience members which leads me to my current role.

I am the Champion for All In which is the new access scheme for creativity and culture in the UK and Ireland. It aims to remove barriers and improve experiences for disabled people and everyone with access requirements.

Created in partnership with the five UK and Ireland arts councils, it builds on the highly successful Hynt scheme that has operated in Wales for a decade. If you've not heard of Hynt before, it is a Welsh language word meaning *"to bridge"*.

I was a member of the Arts Council that approved it back in 2014 and ran one of the first venue members at the Royal Welsh College, where I witnessed first hand how it improved the experience of disabled audiences and our customer facing staff.

In 2023, the Hynt Impact Report revealed how Hynt is having a significant impact on the lives of 30,000 disabled people and 40 theatres in Wales. For example:

- 76% of disabled cardholders said being part of Hynt improved their access to culture
- 73% said that Hynt membership improved their quality of life
- Hynt has generated an additional 144,000 theatre attendances over the last decade
- And for every complimentary companion ticket issued to Hynt cardholders, member venues generated an average of £23 in secondary revenue

So amazing social and economic outcomes.

But as you will all know, cultural access has developed in a piecemeal and rather random way.

Good practice isn't always shared out well and disabled people often have to prove their disability every time they want to buy a ticket. Having been buying access tickets for 40 years, I can tell you its repetitive and exhausting but the outcome of my exposure to the work, of getting inspired, changed my life and consequently many others.

So, for disabled people, All In will be a free membership scheme designed to remove barriers, simplifying the process of booking access tickets and making cultural events more easily navigable.

For venues and the wider cultural sector, All In is a paid-for subscription change programme that provides a suite of groundbreaking accessibility standards. These will be supported by a skills development programme that aims to standardise high quality access, and critically to grow disabled audiences.

In its essence its audience development.

The All In Accessibility Standards have been developed with Attitude is Everything, a disabled-led charity some of you will be familiar with.

These structured guidelines will offer consistency to areas such as the built environment, customer service, creative and cultural experiences, and digital communications. The standards are a global first, and are designed to complement existing frameworks to drive meaningful change.

Throughout 2025, All In has piloted in Leeds with Leeds Heritage Theatres, Leeds Museums and Galleries, Leeds Playhouse and Opera North. And 8 years after I proposed nationalising the Welsh model, All In will begin rolling out across England later this year. It's a BIG moment.

I'm passionate about All In because I want our sector to be a world-leader in access transformation because access never stands still and is continually evolving.

And I want the UK's 16 million disabled people to know that in our arts venues and museums, everyone's welcome. You can find out more by checking our website: allin.online

But there are challenges ahead.

The ableist trade winds sweeping across the Atlantic for a start, where disabled people have been publicly mocked, blamed for air disasters and more. We all understand the implications as corporate America shuns EDI. This change in direction is an active threat to the participation of disabled people in civil society.

If we learned one thing during the UK Government's disastrous attempt to introduce the Universal Credit & Personal Independence Payments Bill in the summer, it's that disabled people's participation in culture as artists, employees and audiences is intrinsically linked to the welfare benefits that we receive.

Just like creative industries tax reliefs, state benefits like PIP and Access to Work have invisibly oiled the wheels of our industry and enabled disabled people's participation in a way that even the best inclusive employment policies simply cannot deliver on their own. Combined these benefits have fuelled the UK's world leading and globally respected disability arts infrastructure alongside a record number of disabled people in creative employment.

Time and again the arts have led society's way with access, but we should all remain on high alert that without equitable access to both these life enhancing benefits, disabled creatives would once again be forced to return to the margins.

But despite all the challenges, I remain optimistic.

I truly believe there has never been a better time to be disabled and be part of the creative industries. There are more opportunities for disabled talent and more value placed on disabled people's contribution than ever before.

And we lead this stuff globally. The UK is regarded as an access leader. And local authorities have such an important role in that picture, to ensure an active talent pipeline from the grass roots, but also to ensure your venues remain accessible.

So I remain convinced our national culture can truly embrace and value disabled people as artists, as employees, as audiences. As equals.

So that concludes my presentation and I’m delighted to take any questions you might have.