

Annual Report

April 2020–March 2021

ico | Independent
Cinema
Office

Contents

Introduction	03
Industry advocacy	05
Equality, Diversity & Inclusion plan	11
Training	15
Screening Days	23
Programming	29
Film Hub South East	35
Advice, information & consultancy	41
Marketing	45
Looking forward	47
About	49

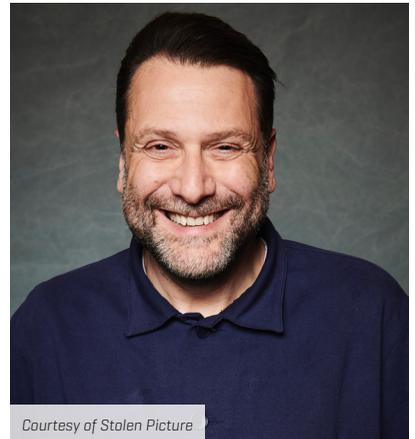
Remembering

This year, very sadly we lost two of our colleagues – Miles Ketley, who had been an ICO Trustee for five years and Sophia Ramcharan, one of our original FEDS trainees from the course's first iteration in 2015.

A lawyer by training, Miles brought creative and incisive thinking to his time on the board but also great warmth, good humour and kindness. Although he worked in the commercial film industry, he was always supportive of our work, unfailingly committed and especially engaged with our objectives around accessibility and the democratisation of the sector and its audiences.

Sophia undertook her FEDS placement at one of our programming clients, Broadway Cinema in Nottingham and developed her career there as their Audience Development, Diversity and Engagement Co-ordinator. She was also a gifted director, producer and writer and film programmer. Warm and intelligent, very funny and always a welcoming and friendly presence, Sophia also participated in our FEDS Elevate Introduction to Leadership course and would undoubtedly have gone on to be a leading light in the sector – she was an amazing and trailblazing talent, cruelly cut short.

We miss them both very much but feel very fortunate that they came into our orbit; we are the richer for it.



Courtesy of Stolen Picture

Miles Ketley



Credit George Torode

Sophia Ramcharan

Introduction



Dorothy Wilson
Chair of Trustees,
Independent Cinema Office

2020-2021 has proved to be the most extraordinary and unforgettable year. In March 2020 COVID-19 and the resultant national lockdown forced us all to stay at home and posed wide-ranging challenges to our personal, family and work lives. The impact has been world-changing. Our filmmakers, film exhibitors, educators and audiences have worked incredibly hard to find new ways to connect – and the power of the internet and new forms of distribution have been harnessed in many innovative ways.

The ICO has been hugely active throughout the pandemic – supporting independent cinemas and providing advice and guidance, surveying cinemas and advocating on their behalf with government and relevant agencies – and helping to distribute funds. We have also worked alongside the performing arts

sector to survey audiences across the country and understand their concerns and their appetites for returning to cinemas, concert halls, theatres etc.

At the time of writing, cinemas are just beginning to reopen. The cinema-going experience will be changed, with smaller capacity audiences for at least some time and changes to film production and distribution too. The future may well offer new opportunities stemming from COVID-19 – for example, simultaneous hybrid in-person and online screenings – giving cinemas opportunities to build new and more diverse audiences. The independent cinema sector has never been so universally challenged – or so universally needed. Let's look forward with confidence to audiences returning.



Catharine Des Forges
Director, Independent Cinema Office

Never before has the cinema exhibition industry faced such a challenging and unprecedented time as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exhibitors have battled with concerns around their own health and those of their loved ones, losing their jobs, the venues in which they work shutting their doors forever and endeavouring to keep the public safe when they did reopen, ensuring that they adhered to new regulations and new circumstances.

This year has also seen the Black Lives Matter movement illuminate the continuing inequities in the film industry, both on and off the screen. We are committed to interrogating our own practices and our own part in participating in systemic inequality and to work to help bring about sector-wide change.

Now in our eighteenth year, we at the ICO have approached the past year and beyond in the same way as all our previous work – asking ourselves what support the sector needs from us right now and how can we make a meaningful impact to develop a more open and thriving exhibition industry.

We also had to make adjustments with a large proportion of staff on furlough. An important part of our intervention over the last year has been in a lobbying capacity, giving a voice to exhibitors and always endeavouring to put their concerns at the centre of national debates. The ICO has also administered and promoted key recovery funds, including the BFI FAN COVID-19 Resilience Fund and Film Exhibition Fund in our capacity as Film Hub South East, to aid the survival of the sector.

We have created new online versions of our established training programmes for use by hundreds of people in the UK and across the globe, live and pre-recorded, ensuring that people still have access to world class training, as well as a feeling of continued connection to the industry. Our flagship Screening Days events have also moved online, removing barriers for attendance in terms of travel, time and costs.

Our communication resources have been vitally important. Our website has become a crucial resource for venues looking for up-to-date details of support and available funding.

In addition, we have sourced and published more blog content and produced new online resources; in both cases, working with new voices to address key issues faced by exhibitors during the pandemic.

We will continue to strive to find innovative and creative solutions to support the sector with reopening and help it evolve into a more sustainable and forward-thinking industry. Our work will continue to advocate for all communities and creatives underrepresented in cinema and film, helping to build back a stronger, more connected and fairer industry – welcoming and open to all. All our work is designed to support our main aim: to enable everyone in the UK to access a communal experience of life-changing cinema.

Finally, we'd like to say a big thank you to our main funder, the BFI and to all our other funders in 2020-21 – Creative Europe, ScreenSkills, Arts Council England and the British Council – as well as our collaborators, supporters and friends.

Industry advocacy

With venues shut for the majority of the last year and much of our programming activity and in-person events coming to a standstill, we focused on lobbying on behalf of and advocating for the concerns of the cinema exhibition industry.



During COVID-19, the ICO's industry advocacy work has been hugely important in helping to accurately inform government departments of the scale of financial support required, as well as demonstrating how independent venues would realistically function with different types of restrictions in place.

We were an original member of the BFI's Screen Sector Taskforce which reconvened in March 2020 to share information, consider the most pressing impacts of COVID-19 and what short, medium and longer term mitigations were needed to ensure the industry and its workforce remained resilient in the face of the pandemic. The group incorporated representatives from all industry sectors including film production, TV, games, animation, VFX, post-production and distribution; we were one of two members from the exhibition sector, the other being the UK Cinema Association (UKCA).

We also participated in the Creative Industries Federation Working Groups and consulted on the UKCA 'Cinemas – keeping workers and customers safe during COVID-19' guidelines produced in consultation with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).



The Independent Cinema Office (ICO) poll of cinemas found 72% saw autumn as the earliest likely date to return to business, while others said they may wait for social distancing to end.

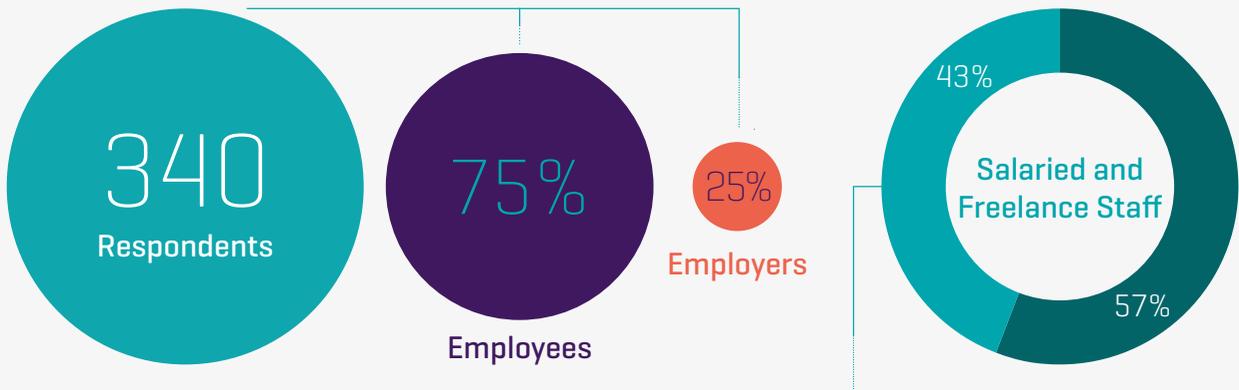
The government has said cinemas could reopen on 4 July but one owner told the BBC he feared venues could feel "like a hospital" while safety precautions remained necessary. Others said if only half the seats – or fewer – were full they would not make a profit.

The ICO has called for extra government funding to help venues survive.

- BBC news article, 31 May 2020

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Exhibition Sector, March 2020

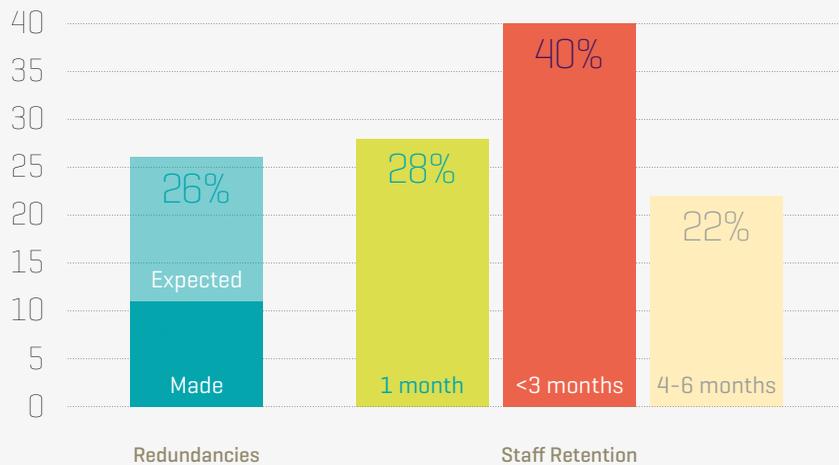
Who we surveyed



An even spread between multiplexes, independent chains, charity or publicly-funded independents, for profit independents, film festivals and community cinemas.

The majority who responded [57%] were salaried staff but 43% were freelancers, zero hours staff members and casual staff members.

What employers said about future outlook



37% of employers have made or expect to make redundancies.

28% of employers expect to only be able to pay workers at the current level for the next month. 40% see this horizon at less than three months.

79% of employers plan to access the COVID-19 job retention scheme from the government.

Only 31% are taking a business rates holiday.

National surveys

Over the past year, the ICO produced two influential surveys highlighting the concerns of independent exhibition at a national level. Both surveys were created to accurately represent the needs of the independent cinema sector to feed into lobbying for support during and after the pandemic. Our first survey, [The Impact of COVID-19 on the Exhibition Sector](#), was sent out on 25

March 2020, just days after the Prime Minister announced that cinemas had to close – an extraordinary situation which had not occurred since 1939. Knowing the devastating impact this would have on the industry, and lacking any clear reopening date or recovery schemes in place, we wanted to speak directly to the sector and discover how long they could hope to survive under

these unprecedented circumstances. The survey received 340 respondents, and its key finding was that the majority of cinemas would only be able to continue to pay employees for one to three months. This case for support was fed into discussions with DCMS, highlighting the urgency of recovery funds being put in place.

In May 2020, following reports in the national press that cinemas were lobbying to reopen in June 2020, we carried out a second survey, *Reopening Cinemas – The Independent Way* to get a picture of the independent sector around reopening with social distancing measures in place and to put forward the case for further support.

With 497 respondents, the main findings were that 41% of venues did not think they could open with social distancing measures; September 2020 was the earliest most independent cinemas thought they would be able to reopen; cinemas faced a 50% loss of capacity and most venues felt they

would only survive three months with social distancing measures in place without government support.

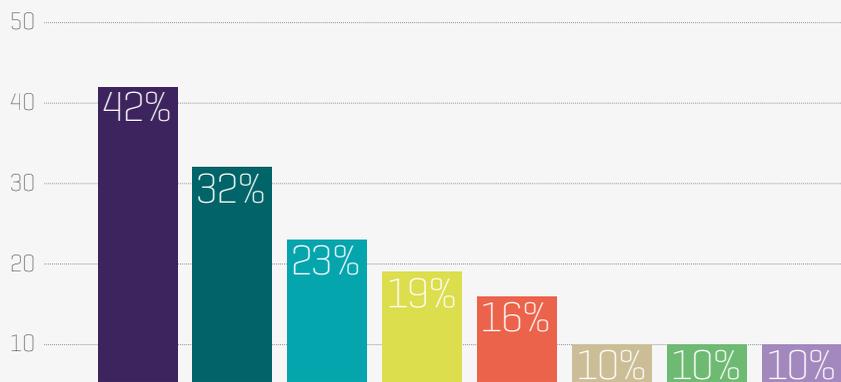
The survey garnered a huge amount of national press coverage and was featured by the BBC and ITV and in *Deadline, Evening Standard, Financial Times, Fortune, Good Housekeeping, The Guardian, The Independent, Little White Lies, NME, Screen Daily, The Telegraph, Time Out, Variety, Wired* and *Yahoo News*.

In partnership with the BFI, the findings from the survey were again fed back to DCMS as evidence for support for the cultural cinema sector and contributed to the scale of the government recovery package.

Along with lobbying for support for the independent sector, we sought to raise the overall profile of its concerns by participating in national and international industry panels and events for Comscore, EFM & Next Wave, Berlinale German Film and Television Academy, Film Festival Alliance, Göteborg Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival and Vilnius International Film Festival.

Reopening Cinemas – The Independent Way, May 2020

Cinemas' main concerns for the coming months:

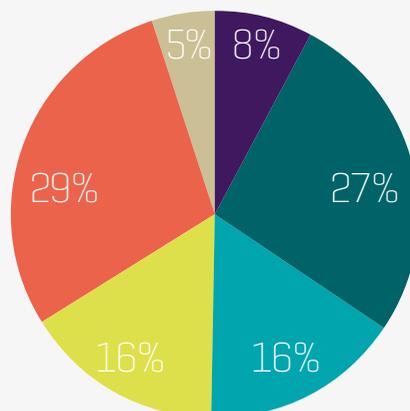


- Loss of revenue
- Ability to re-attract audiences when cinemas are able to reopen
- Uncertainty about when cinemas will be able to reopen
- Ability to pay staff and retain jobs
- Going into administration
- Accessing government support
- Disruption to the production and distribution chains
- Wellbeing of staff while working at home

Who we surveyed



Good response from CEOs, directors and managers from a wide range of venues, with various audience capacities from large to small.



- Independent chain
- Independent (charity)
- Independent (for profit)
- Film festival
- Community cinema
- Multiplex

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Coronavirus: Independent cinemas unlikely to open before September

By Oliver Wright
BBC News

31 May 2020



Most venues feel they would only survive a maximum of three months with social distancing in place

Independent cinemas have - like other entertainment venues across the UK - been closed since March because of the coronavirus lockdown. But while some owners are keen to welcome audiences as soon as possible, many have concerns about reopening too soon, for both financial and atmospheric reasons.

A survey of independent cinemas in the UK found a majority did not expect to reopen before September.

The Independent Cinema Office (ICO) poll found 72% saw autumn as the

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NEWS

UK indie cinemas will only survive three months with social distancing, says survey

By Ben Dalton | 22 May 2020



The majority of UK independent cinemas would only survive three months with social distancing measures, according to a survey by the country's Independent Cinema Office (ICO).

Although the survey of 497 respondents called

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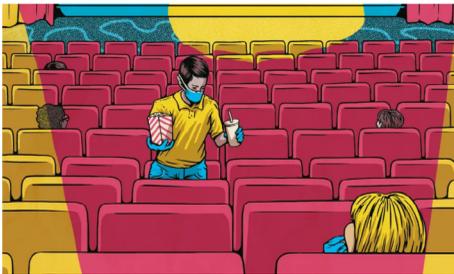
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Reel challenge: what will cinema look like after lockdown is relaxed?

Steve Stone



A lockdown to social distancing... Illustration: Cat Scola/The Guardian

Blockbusters such as Tenet and Mulan are slated for a summer

CULTURE > FILM

41% of independent UK film venues 'unable to reopen with social distancing'

VIEW COMMENTS



Empty seating: Cinemas in the UK have been closed since lockdown began in March / Karen Zhao/Unsplash

By Jochan Embley | 26 May 2020

A large number of independent UK film venues would be unable to reopen with social distancing measures - and many of those that could operate would only be able to survive for three months while following these protocols.

The findings come from a survey carried out by the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), which asked 497 venues - including independent cinemas, film festivals and others - about their future prospects as the

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May 26, 2020 4:16am PT

U.K. Independent Cinemas See September as Most Likely Reopening Date

By Tim Dams



Independent Cinema Office

Many U.K. independent cinemas say they are unlikely to reopen before September.

A survey of the sector by U.K. organization the Independent Cinema Office (ICO), found that independent cinemas felt pressure from the commercial exhibition sector and the wider film industry to open before then, when it is not financially viable or even safe for them to do so.

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BIFA



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IN CINEMAS NOW**



A startling survey by the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) found that out of 497 UK operators of all sizes (including the larger chains), 41% do not think they will be able to open with social distancing measures. Only 28% thought they would be reopening in July or August, and a significant number don't expect to reopen until next year.

- The Guardian, 4 July 2020

Back to the cinema campaign

Since July 2020, we have been consulting with BIFA on their 'This is Your Cinema' campaign, which aimed to encourage audiences between 15-25 years old back to the cinema during the period where cinemas were able to open. Advising on what campaigns and collateral would work best for independent cinemas and seeking opportunities to support UK venues as they sought ways to bring audiences back to their venues safely, we also disseminated campaign information across our networks to encourage engagement.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan

Following the events of summer 2020, specifically the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests worldwide, we developed an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan for our activities and organisation. A living document, this plan will evolve with the ICO, the wider sector and the world at large.



The ICO was established in 2003 to ensure that a wide range of stories reached a wider range of audiences and we have put inclusion and diversity at the heart of what we do ever since. However, the murder of George Floyd in the USA in May 2020 and the subsequent worldwide Black Lives Matter protests sparked crucial internal conversations about our work, our influence and how we use our power.

As an organisation with a predominantly white staff and Board of Trustees, we recognise our own position of privilege, our shortcomings and that we don't have all the answers. We have been asking ourselves urgent questions about our organisational culture, how to scrutinise our assumptions and how structural racism operates. Working with critical friends external to our organisation but experienced in organisational change and anti-racist work in the arts, we have developed an [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan \(EDI plan\)](#), the first phase of which was published on our website in March 2021. We have committed to publishing updates on our progress twice a year and encourage feedback, ensuring the plan will continue to evolve.

Currently our EDI plan specifically focuses on addressing racism; however, we take an intersectional view of matters relating to equality and inclusion and understand an individual's multifaceted social and political identities (race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, religion and others) overlap to influence their experiences of racism. We recognise these are complex and nuanced issues and in future will move to demonstrate this more clearly in forthcoming iterations of our plan and commitments.

We are in the early stages of this work and actively welcome comments and conversations with anyone who would like to get in touch about any of the points covered. You can contact us at info@independentcinemaoffice.org.uk.

What did we do to arrive at the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion action plan?

- We invited all staff and Board members to contribute to an anonymous document sharing thoughts, feelings, reactions and ideas in response to the Black Lives Matter movement
- We asked for volunteers to form an internal Anti-Racism Working Group, which held 12 detailed, two-hour discussion sessions in August and September 2020
- The group reviewed all the ideas in the anonymous document and began to develop an action plan specific to the work of the ICO
- This draft action plan was discussed and agreed at a staff meeting attended by all employees
- We then consulted with three experienced arts professionals who acted in the role of critical friends, scrutinising our commitments and decision-making processes and providing valuable insight into key areas we needed to consider moving forward.

The ICO's Anti-Racism Working Group will continue to meet regularly and discussions will take place fortnightly at the ICO's staff meeting, to ensure the ideas, challenges and commitments in the plan remain a constant focus in our work.

Critical friends



Lara Ratnaraja

"When the ICO approached me to be one of their critical friends as they explored and developed the organisation's response towards Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; what struck me and interested me was that in a sea of black squares they came across as authentic, committed and crucially recognised the role they had to play in order to become an anti-racist organisation.

Whilst the initial thinking was to have an anti-racism plan, our discussions led the team to look at enabling greater equality and what that and diversity inclusion looks like, not just for the ICO itself but the members it services and also to interrogate the lens and bias the sector operates within.

The team were open and transparent to work with, curious and inquiring but at the same time respectful of the critical friends' boundaries and always ensuring that our emotional labour wasn't exploited or disregarded. I always felt valued, and that this work was important and essential and moved beyond tokenism and instrumentalism.

We started from recognising the inherent position and privilege of the organisation and many of the staff in different ways and unpacked key areas of the organisation, its services and its culture in an inclusive and nuanced way. The work is by no means completed but the ICO continues to work to address diversity and what it means to become an anti-racist organisation.

There was a real sense of how they could help effect and support structural change, the change that the sector needs to see and how to look at diversifying the organisation itself in order to meet these needs.

It was a pleasure working with Hatice and Catharine and I look forward to seeing how this work unfolds. It's also a pleasure working alongside the other critical friends in a collegiate and inclusive environment."

Lara specialises in diversity, innovation, leadership, collaboration, stakeholder management, advocacy, thought leadership and cultural policy development and implementation within the HE, cultural and digital sector. She works or has worked with the [University of Birmingham](#), [Coventry University](#), [Birmingham City University STEAMhouse](#) and the [University of Salford](#), delivering and developing projects on diversity, digital engagement and research collaborations between arts, HEIs and SMEs.



Anita Bhalla OBE

Anita is currently Chair of Performances at [Birmingham PLC \(Town Hall and Symphony Hall\)](#), [Independent Member of Birmingham & Solihull Clinical Commissioning Group](#), Independent Member and Vice-Chair of Council at the [University of Warwick](#), Chair of [Iniva](#), Director of [Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP](#) (Local Enterprise Partnership), Governor of the [RSC](#), and Chair of [WMCA Leadership Commission](#).



Matthew Xia

Matthew is a self-taught theatre director, DJ, composer, broadcaster and journalist with a focus on using theatre as a platform to promote inclusion, activism and social change.

One of his earliest jobs was being commissioned to create a musical at [Theatre Royal Stratford East](#) at the age of 18. A year later, he was appointed as the first DJ on Black music radio station [BBC 1Xtra](#). Since then, he has directed plays for [The Royal Court](#), the [Barbican](#), the [Young Vic](#) and many more.

[To find out more about our critical friends, please see their full biographies here.](#)

The co-production ladder



The co-production ladder inspired the development of the FEDS Co-creation Committee. Courtesy of Bonnie Chiu, the Social Investment Consultancy, adapted from an original idea from [Think Local Act Personal](#).

Some actions have been taken already including:

The recruitment of an independent HR consultant

In October 2020 we recruited an independent HR consultant to work with us on ensuring our policies, staff development and recruitment processes are as inclusive as possible and to provide an independent representative outside of our Senior Management Team for all staff to speak to and raise concerns if necessary. In consultation with our HR advisor we have also created a new recruitment process for all future roles.

Publishing ICO staff and Board of Trustees demographic information

The ICO is a small organisation with 20 staff and opportunities to join our team are rare. We want to be transparent about [who currently works at the ICO](#). We surveyed our staff and board to precisely log ICO demographics and published the data [here](#). We acknowledge that the people who work at the ICO do not

fully represent the diversity of the city of London where we are based, and ensuring our recruitment practices and staff retention policies are as inclusive as possible are key priorities for the ICO's future.

Film Exhibition Distribution Sales (FEDS) Co-creation Committee

The ICO's FEDS training programme has been running successfully since 2015, recruiting ambitious trainees from groups currently underrepresented in the UK film industry and providing them with paid work experience in the film exhibition sector alongside career coaching, networking opportunities and industry training sessions. The programme seeks to diversify the type of people who work in the sector, ultimately leading to a wider range of audiences for independent cinema. To date, 81% of trainees successfully gained employment in the sector once their placements ended.

In the last few years we have focused on supporting the alumni group to successfully develop in their careers and continue working in the sector longer term. In addition, we have been keen to evolve the model for the scheme and in 2021 set up the FEDS Co-creation Committee to more actively involve the alumni group in the strategic decisions that will shape the programme's future direction. Ultimately, we hope this will lead to a more nuanced approach to our evaluation of the trainee experience and to working practices and attitudes in the wider sector, with a view to creating a lasting impact.

Virtual Screening Days

In December 2020 and March 2021 we hosted our first Virtual Screening Days events. We have committed to showing at least 30% of films from Black, Asian and ethnically diverse creative teams at Screening Days and met this target at both events with 50% of features at the December event and 30% at our March event.

Training

Our innovative training portfolio offers film exhibition professionals the opportunity to benefit from high-level knowledge, ensuring our sector is successful, inclusive and progressive. Following the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, we rapidly evolved our training and professional development offer to support a sector facing unprecedented challenges.

**IN 2020-21 WE TRAINED
OVER 120 FILM EXHIBITION
PROFESSIONALS FROM
NEARLY 100 ORGANISATIONS
AND 19 COUNTRIES
LIVE ONLINE**



Between April 2020 and March 2021, 774 students enrolled on our online learning platform, which has been used by over 1.4k students to date

Over the previous two years, we had already been experimenting with online training formats but the urgency of the pandemic's impact on film exhibition and the practicalities of delivering essential support without physically being able to meet meant we had to adapt quickly. After some initial findings, we decided to completely redesign some of our established courses, usually delivered in-person, to suit delivery online. We were also able to further develop our existing online learning content, which gives participants the ability to work through learning materials at their own pace, sharing ideas and questions with other learners and course leaders in a digital space. These online formats are more accessible to those unable to travel to training courses in person, pay for travel or accommodation or allocate specific timings to training, and can also act as a stepping stone to further skills development.

However, despite the greater inclusivity and accessibility afforded by online training options, there are obvious drawbacks for those who have less sophisticated home IT set-ups or who lack stable internet connections. In addition, while delivering training and professional development opportunities for the sector over the past 15 years, we have found that people working in film exhibition consistently highlight the

importance of the simple experience of meeting and learning from their peers, whether from the UK or beyond, often building connections that last well after the formal courses have finished. It is impossible to replicate the remarkable impact of in-person networking in the digital space and while we will continue to develop our online training portfolio, we are also looking forward to resuming some in-person training in 2021.

We are really proud of the support we have been able to offer the sector throughout this extraordinary period and remain grateful to our funders – the BFI and the BFI Film Audience Network, Creative Europe, ScreenSkills and the British Council – for making this possible.



20 film festival professionals from 13 countries took part in the virtual DYFF course



100%

of participants would recommend the course and thought it was good value for money

Live online training

Developing Your Film Festival

Due to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on global travel we decided to deliver the 10th edition of our Developing Your Film Festival (DYFF) course online in March 2021, redesigning the course content to better suit a virtual edition. The live course is delivered over six full days, comprising presentations, group work, film screenings and networking, but the virtual format was delivered over five weeks, with several short sessions per week. As well as our desire to avoid trainees spending too long staring at a computer screen, this format enabled participants to better process the course content in real time; enabling them to take inspiring new ideas back to their organisations while the course was ongoing, returning to the next sessions with new insights and practical follow-up questions about how they could best use these ideas to effect positive change in their festivals.

As well as equipping our trainees with the essential skills, knowledge and confidence needed to strengthen their festival business models and build their audiences, we designed this year's edition of DYFF to help inform and sustain a sector that was fundamentally changed by the onset of COVID-19, with key discussions about crisis management, emerging

business models for hybrid festivals and engaging online audiences. Our new discussion strand 'Tales from the Pandemic' focused on these areas of rapid change, with speakers describing their various responses to the pandemic, what they learnt about their festivals and audiences and the adaptations they will take from this period into the future. One of the positive aspects of hosting the course online was that it enabled us to attract a wider range of international speakers than we sometimes can in person due to time, travel or budgetary constraints. Speakers came from festivals including Blackstar, FIDMarseille, DocLisboa, Visions du Réel and Toronto, New Horizons, Rotterdam and Vilnius International Film Festivals.

20 film festival professionals from 13 countries took part in the virtual course in February and March 2021. In total we received 57 applications from 26 different countries. The live edition of the course is renowned for its immersive, intense nature and plentiful networking opportunities, which can never truly be replicated online, but we hope to bring this group together at one of our international alumni meet-ups in the future.

DYFF 2021 was supported by the Creative Europe Programme - MEDIA and the British Council.



This experience showed me that I was more than capable to handle my new role; changing my mindset to one of self-belief and confidence transformed my outlook entirely especially upon the realisation that others were experiencing the same confusion and loneliness that I was.

- DYFF 2021 participant

100%

of participants would recommend the course



A great way to bring UK festivals together and begin conversations about future collaborations and shared ideas.

- UK Film Festival Roundtable 2021 participant

UK Film Festival Roundtable

With financial support from the BFI Film Audience Network we were able to design and deliver the UK Film Festival Roundtable; an essential development and discussion opportunity for UK film festival professionals. Staff from 15 UK festivals took part in this series of six interactive group sessions, delivered throughout March and April 2021, which included discussions on strategic planning, audience development, press and PR, and sponsorship and partnerships, as well as how to negotiate the specific challenges presented by COVID-19 and its impact going forward. In addition, festival professionals were offered a bespoke consultancy session with the course speaker they felt was most relevant to their current challenges, giving them the chance to receive personalised advice and take part in a more in-depth discussion.

To help lead the sessions, we invited industry guests from some of the UK's largest festivals, including Sheffield Doc/Fest, Flatpack Festival and Encounters, as well as expert consultants including Sarah Boiling.



Depot living roof, ICO Summer Screening Days 2019. Credit Paul Johnson

Making Cinemas Environmentally Sustainable

To enable a greater level of discussion and engagement with the online [Green Cinema Toolkit](#) we published last year, we worked in partnership with Julie's Bicycle – a charity that supports the creative community to act on climate change and environmental sustainability – to deliver online training workshops in January and February 2021. Over 100 people who work in UK cinemas and film festivals took part in these seminars, which aimed to:

- Build momentum, interest and inspire action for making environmental improvements
- Enhance understanding and capture the challenges and opportunities of sustainability for those working in film exhibition
- Increase knowledge and skills in understanding and improving environmental impact.

Participants were also offered one-to-one bespoke consultancy sessions with Julie's Bicycle, enabling them to discuss specific possibilities for environmental sustainability at their particular cinema or festival.



I learnt so much and have taken away lots of ideas which will now be instrumental in updating environmental policies at four cinemas. It's really made me reflect on our carbon footprint and the things we can do to improve as a business. It's especially great to be doing this at the moment whilst the cinema is shut – lovely to do something positive for the cinema whilst the doors have to remain closed.

- Making Cinemas Environmentally Sustainable 2021 participant



Data-Driven Marketing (DDM)

Much like the Data-Driven Marketing online learning course, this live online edition was designed to better inform cinema exhibition and distribution professionals about how best to exploit the data available to them. Data-Driven Marketing is one of the ICO's most technical courses, and provides participants with key practical skills they can take back to their venues and implement immediately.

Since 2017 the course has been attended by 63 film exhibition and distribution professionals, including staff from festivals, independent cinemas and distribution companies. The course ran over six weeks from September to October 2020 and was attended by 18 participants from all corners of the UK.



DDM Online is an essential course for every marketer wanting to optimise their campaign and maximise their ROI.

- DDM 2020 participant



100%

of participants rated their overall experience of the course as 'excellent'

Professional development

FEDS Elevate

Since 2015, our FEDS programme has recruited ambitious trainees from groups currently underrepresented in the UK film industry and provided them with paid, hands-on work experience in the film exhibition sector alongside career coaching and monthly industry training sessions. The aim of the FEDS programme is to diversify personnel working in the sector, thereby better serving a wider and more diverse range of audiences for independent cinema through venues and film festivals.

This year, thanks to support from ScreenSkills and the BFI Film Audience Network, we were delighted to present the next iteration of our FEDS training portfolio – FEDS Elevate: Leadership Programme for Cinema Professionals. FEDS Elevate aimed to support and develop this alumni group, and others from underrepresented groups, helping them to progress into decision-making roles in the sector and thereby embedding real change within the UK film industry.

The course consisted of four separate training days spread out over six months and encompassing the following modules: 'The High Performing Positive Manager'; 'Time and Team'; 'Inspiring Others' and 'Strengths-Based Coaching'. Between these training days, delegates had access to individual executive coaching sessions.



The fact that we haven't just been taught, we've been given tools and frameworks for everything that we can return to again and again. From coaching to time management to emotional control and catastrophising – we didn't just learn lessons and outlooks, but the tools to cope and be better in those areas.

- FEDS Elevate 2020 participant



100%

of participants said the course was 'excellent' in encouraging and improving self-reflection

Women's Leadership

2020 marked the third iteration of the ICO's Women's Leadership programme, a demonstrably successful intervention aimed at women working in senior roles and designed to ensure more equal representation at the very highest levels. At this career stage, women are consistently underrepresented across the film industry value chain, particularly in film exhibition where only 4% of CEOs are female. Women's Leadership aims to address this by providing a structured and supportive progression route.

Over six months, the eight selected participants were supported through taught modules, individual coaching and mentoring sessions to formally identify a career progression path and create a personal development programme. The programme also aimed

to increase confidence and expand peer networks, encouraging professional relationships that are supportive rather than competitive.

The programme's industry sessions were originally held in person but later moved online following the onset of COVID-19. Guests included Sharon Ament (Director, Museum of London), Gaylene Gould (Creative Director, Broadcaster, Cultural Ambassador for London), Briony Hanson (Director of Film, British Council) and Dorothy Wilson (Chair of Trustees, Independent Cinema Office; Independent Consultant, Coach & Producer).

“

The whole course has been transformative for me, I've been able to see myself in a new light. I am content with the way I lead and know that my own personal style is something to be proud of. I am excited to be able to make changes to the film landscape and to push for meaningful diversity in the sector.

- Women's Leadership 2020 participant

Data-Driven Marketing Online Course

Home → Online Learning → Data-Driven Marketing Online Course



Welcome to the ICO's DDM: Data-Driven Marketing online training course.

In the following seven lessons, you'll hear from some of the industry's leading experts in marketing, with a specific focus on how you can use data to better engage with your existing audience, or approach new audiences

Student Dashboard

My Dashboard

Lessons

Introduction

- Introduction to Data-Driven Marketing
- A bit more about you

From data to insight

- Lesson introduction – From data to insight
- Your sources of data
- Your barriers
- Your data-driven goals
- Data collection essentials
- Data-driven marketing process example



This course is exactly what I had been looking for, and I had a great time working through it. It's logically structured, flows well and feels very organic.

– DDM online learning course user

Data-Driven Marketing: Online Learning Platform

The Data-Driven Marketing online learning course is the third programme launched on the ICO's Online Learning Platform. Data-Driven Marketing was originally created to help cinemas, film festivals and distributors learn how to acquire more useful data and make more informed marketing decisions. Having previously delivered three successful in-person versions of the course and one live online edition, we were easily able to transfer the course's key learnings across to this new online format. On the course, students learn essential practical lessons about data and their application in cinemas including: data collection, using box office data, the use of data within marketing for distribution, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and analytics dashboards.

The programme launched in November 2020, and in that time 80 students have enrolled. The course is designed to take seven weeks to finish, although it can be taken at whatever pace the student prefers. Whilst the majority of the students are based in the UK, 12% are international, with countries represented including Brazil, Panama and Chile.

We made our online learning courses free to access at the beginning of the pandemic and have run different promotions throughout the year to enable greater inclusivity.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, we had 774 students enrol on the online learning platform, which has been used by over 1.4k students to date.

Screening Days

The UK's largest events for exhibitors, Screening Days give exhibitors a cost-efficient way of seeing as many key films as possible, with a carefully curated selection put together by ICO programmers.

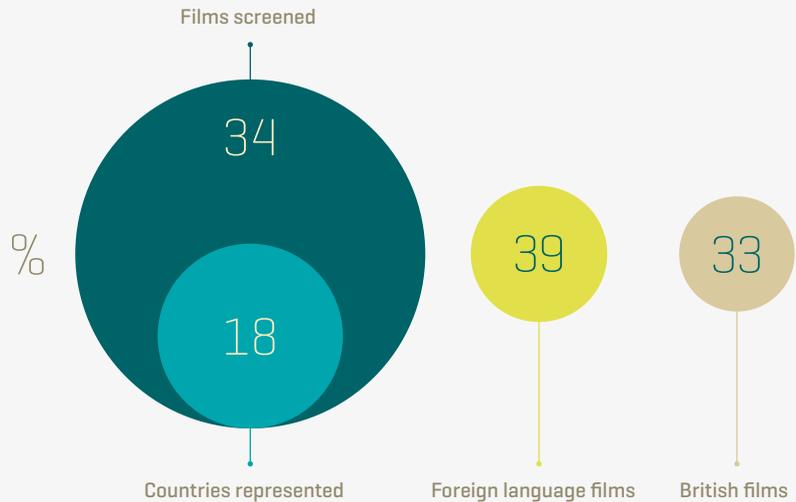
**ACROSS TWO VIRTUAL
EVENTS WE WELCOMED 664
UNIQUE DELEGATES (20%
NEWCOMERS) FROM 326
UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS**

Our highest ever attendance for any event

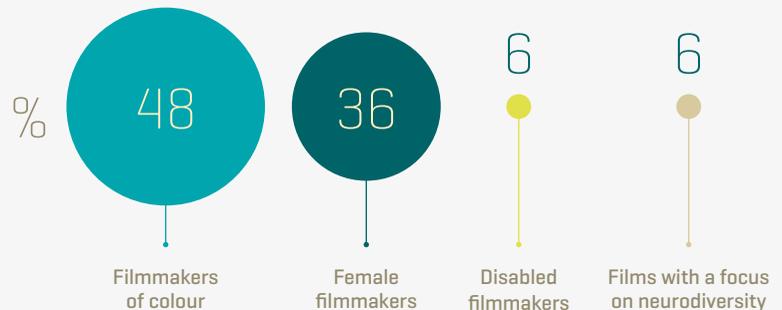
Screening Days is the UK's biggest event for cinemas, film festivals, community screens and film societies. We've been delivering it for more than 15 years now, with the consistent goal of helping cinemas find the films that will matter in their communities and build unique programmes. International film festivals and other screenings are often hard for exhibitors to attend: either geographically impossible or financially inaccessible. We want to make sure that where a cinema is based is no barrier to getting the best intel on what you can show and how you'll make it appealing to local audiences. Alongside the best world cinema and British indie films, we also see Screening Days as a key engine for change in cinema exhibition, offering best practice sessions, provocations and industry intelligence. We gather programmers and marketers, veterans and new starters to an event that aims to speak to all of their needs.

Like the cinemas we support with the event, we were forced to do things very differently during the pandemic. Continuing with in-person events was obviously impossible, but we were also pushed to ask deeper questions about how we could respond to the cinemas' current needs. With a shifting release calendar, cinemas at risk of closure and others desperately seeking ways of serving audiences online, new priorities emerged. Looking at the restrictions as an opportunity to find new ways to support cinemas and experiment with a long-standing event, we conducted a broad survey to understand sector needs. We wanted to hear from regular Screening Days attendees, but also from people who hadn't attended before or perhaps felt excluded from the event. Overwhelmingly, this survey showed support for an online iteration of Screening Days and also gave us space to think about the new opportunities afforded by this way of delivering the event.

Screening Days statistics



In line with our commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion:



The highest rated films across the events

Film	Score
1 <i>The Father</i>	89%
2 <i>Nomadland</i>	86%
3 <i>After Love</i>	84%
4 <i>Minari</i>	81%
5 <i>Gagarine</i>	80%
6 <i>There Is No Evil</i>	79%
7 <i>The Reason I Jump</i>	77%
8 <i>I Never Cry</i>	73%
9 <i>Limbo</i>	73%
10 <i>First Cow</i>	72%



After Love, courtesy of BFI Distribution



The Father, courtesy of Lionsgate



I Never Cry, courtesy of Eureka Entertainment



The Reason I Jump, courtesy of Picturehouse Entertainment



Nomadland, courtesy of Disney



There Is No Evil, courtesy of New Wave

50%

More than 50% of films by people of colour and disabled directors

Our hopes for an unprecedented online event were wildly exceeded. Both December and March's events rank as our highest attendance on record. This growth is due in no small part to some of the barriers we sought to reduce with our adaptation of the events. Firstly, we changed our pricing model. We made passes less expensive across the board, but also set prices around financial means rather than organisation type. We also worked with our sponsor Filmbankmedia to provide a batch of free passes, available on request, without criteria or means-testing.

Working online also allowed us to better address disabled access, making the event fully captioned for the first time. All feature films screened with English subtitles and captions to fully describe audio. Sessions and discussions were also captioned, along with distributor introductions and other video shown. The ICO has a long-standing commitment to making the cinema more inclusive for those who make use of captions. This extends beyond Deaf and Hard of Hearing people to non-native English speakers and neurodivergent audience members. Where captions already existed, we collated them; where captions needed

to be commissioned, we worked with subtitling service Matchbox Cine to produce them. We then returned these captions to distributors for use in their nationwide releases. We hope to continue this level of access for all digital and in person Screening Days, so that going forward, a film's inclusion in Screening Days will indicate to programmers that it will have captions on release.

With our programming for the event, our focus is on helping venues find titles to reach the widest group of people possible in their communities. In 2020, we made a formal commitment to include more work from groups we have identified as underrepresented in distribution and exhibition: people of colour and disabled filmmakers. In the main Screening Days programme, we will include a minimum of 30% work by people from these groups. Since we know that some excellent work that would connect with audiences never makes it into distribution, we are also making interventions to include material from other sources, starting with our *Introducing...* programme, which highlights emerging filmmakers whose work cinemas should have on their radar and consider showing.



Gagarine, courtesy of Curzan Artificial Eye

All films

and discussions fully captioned

Going online also gave us opportunities to access a wider range of speakers and thinkers for our capacity-building sessions. The need to innovate became an existential question for many cinemas during the pandemic. Overnight, their business model changed to one of streaming and online curation, while they also faced a multitude of scenarios for reopening and responding to audiences with radically new expectations. Subsequently, we designed our sessions to deliver expert guidance in these areas, with a much wider group of attendees than usual able to attend, contribute and shape discussions. Topics included the possibilities for diversifying programming at a time of reduced cinema releases; building a virtual screen and innovation around online audience engagement; and best practice for reopening from all angles, including customer safety, communications and how to institute a new focus on accessibility for Deaf, neurodiverse and disabled audiences. Audience development discussions and programming and marketing spotlight sessions on specific titles enabled attending exhibitors to plan how to most effectively position them.

With the additional benefits demonstrated by our digital events, we see the future of Screening Days as both online and in person, even after social distancing is a distant memory. There is immense value in often isolated exhibition industry workers coming together in person, to network and see first-hand how other cinemas around the country function; there is also value in being able to access an event with far fewer barriers. Our aim is to offer the best experience for attendees on whichever platform it can be found. Over the next year we will be reinventing Screening Days by working with a year-round [advisory group](#), who will consult with our team to help address biases and barriers, challenge accepted norms and deliver a more dynamic event series that speaks to the issues that really make a difference in exhibition.

To further share the ICO's influence, we will also be offering paid open calls to deliver sessions at our events, to make use of an even wider network of knowledge and best practice.



ICO Screening Days are a really important part of the film calendar, and I have missed them enormously. I was delighted to hear this online event was taking place and it provided an invaluable opportunity to dive back into the world of new cinema releases and look ahead to a brighter 2021.

- Virtual Screening Days attendee

The sessions were great – there was a feeling of connectedness that is so important at this time. The content was really useful.

- Virtual Screening Days attendee

Programming

The ICO believes everyone should have access to life-changing cinema. We support cinemas all over the UK, whether they're in major cities or rural communities, to access a cultural film offering which will take their venue to the next level. This year, we have helped venues navigate long periods of closure and the extreme circumstances the pandemic brought.

**WE PROGRAMMED THE
FIRST ONLINE EDITION
OF BORDERLINES FILM
FESTIVAL, WHICH SAW 15,814
ADMISSIONS WITH TICKETS
BOUGHT ACROSS 800
DIFFERENT POSTCODES**



Saint Maud, courtesy of Studiocanal



As an independent cinema, Depot aims to present our community with a wide palette of films in order to entertain and educate, and to share stories relevant to current issues. This is an enjoyable weekly challenge, supported by the ICO programming team. The ICO is also invaluable in navigating and negotiating terms with a multitude of distributors.

- Carmen Slijpen, Director and Programmer, Depot

Since its inception, the ICO's programming service has aimed to help cinemas show a wider range of films and reach a wider range of audiences across the UK. We believe that the principle of diversity in both programming and audience development is key to creating a richer and more relevant film culture. We want to encourage cinemas to be more adventurous in their programming and support them to be more ambitious in their audience development.

Our strategy to achieve this aim has been around creating greater capacity in the independent film exhibition sector by developing the skillset of professionals working in independent film, alongside supporting greater local access to cinemas, festivals and screening events across the UK, and supporting the increasing number and range of films made available to cinemas.

2020-21 has been an exceptionally challenging year for film exhibitors – a year in which all cinemas have been closed for lengthy periods and then open only with reduced capacity; in which festivals have mostly become online events, numerous film releases have been postponed and audiences have developed habit-forming viewing on-demand. And yet, in spite of all of these challenges – some of which have

been identified as existential threats to cinema – we reach the end of the year with a strong sense of optimism for the health of the independent film exhibition sector. Many of ICO's client cinemas saw high attendance levels when they were able to reopen, and especially pleasing was the level of audience support for 'smaller' independently released films. Many cinemas have developed virtual screenings which can supplement their regular programming even after they reopen their doors. And our festival client, Borderlines Film Festival, achieved target-breaking viewing figures from across the UK for its debut online edition in March 2021. All of these factors provide a clear indicator that there continues to be a strong audience appetite for our client cinemas and their particular style of programming.

During the past year, we have also engaged with a further three client cinemas: in Chichester, Northampton and Wirksworth, Derbyshire. And, as we move into May with the reopening of cinemas, the addition of two more client cinemas will take the ICO to a record total of 29 venues – a clear indicator that our approach to programming is seen as more necessary than ever.



Courtesy of Northampton Filmhouse

The ICO programming team supports cinemas all over the UK, whether they're in major cities or rural communities, to access a cultural film offering which will take their venue to the next level. With a focus on long-term audience development, one of our main goals is to drive audiences to be more adventurous. We work in collaborative partnership with our clients, based on a shared understanding and vision of what their programme and audience can be, and work towards increasing the scope of films they show and widening the audience demographics they engage with. With over 60 years' collective programming experience, the team offers informed advice and acts as a consistent intermediary between cinemas and film distributors, sales agents and producers. The ICO has also developed a clear model of booking terms for its network of cinemas while preserving the individual integrity of each venue.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in March 2020, cinemas have had to change the way they programme and communicate with their audiences. With some venues opening and closing at short notice due to numerous national and local lockdowns, an increase in flexibility and short-term planning were crucial for success. Lead times on programming were cut, as we weren't able to confidently schedule more than a few weeks in advance due to the ever-changing situation, and were often waiting on government advice. This period also naturally affected the release

calendar and distributors' decisions around whether to release films or not. The calendar was often volatile and sparse with releases regularly shifting; prompting a renewed reliance on repertory titles, as well as a departure from printed programmes in favour of online listings. However, we believe that this year of change and adaptation has not been in vain, and that lessons from these experiences will stand cinemas in good stead as the industry continues to evolve going forward.

As well as guiding cinemas through the pandemic with advice on how to remain nimble and flexible in response to the fast-changing landscape, we also provided regular industry updates, interpreted what government advice would mean for venues, lobbied and advocated for cinemas' needs, assisted venues in applying for the Culture Recovery Fund, supported cinemas with establishing virtual programme offerings, and communicated distributors' releases dates and changes, often redoing programmes at short notice. We also supported our client cinemas in material ways by waiving fees through periods of closure, whether forced or chosen, and halving fees when venues had to operate with social distancing.

As restrictions ease and we focus on cinemas reopening, a backlog of films that were not released over the past year means that – just like in pre-pandemic times – we're looking at a release calendar with an overwhelming amount of choices for

cinemas. This makes collaboration with a well-informed, highly experienced programme advisor increasingly valuable. We're delighted to be working in partnership with 24 existing clients and five new venues in the coming year.

List of current ICO venues:

- › Barn Cinema, Totnes
- › Borderlines Film Festival, various
- › Broadway Cinema, Nottingham
- › Buxton Cinema
- › Catford Mews, London
- › Chapter, Cardiff
- › Cinemarsh, Romney
- › Depot, Lewes
- › Derby QUAD
- › Forum Cinema, Northampton
- › Garden Cinema, London
- › Hebden Bridge Picture House
- › Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds
- › Kiln Theatre, London
- › Ludlow Assembly Rooms
- › Malvern Theatres
- › Phoenix, Leicester
- › Royston Picture Palace
- › Saffron Screen, Saffron Walden
- › Showroom Workstation, Sheffield
- › South Mill Arts, Bishop's Stortford
- › Stoke Film Theatre
- › Watershed, Bristol
- › Wellington Orbit, Telford

New venues from 2020-21:

- › **Chichester Cinema at New Park**
- › **Northampton Filmhouse**
- › **Northern Light Cinema , Wirksworth**
- › **Reading Biscuit Factory**
- › **Totnes Cinema**

Borderlines Film Festival 2021

Over the past year, we have seen film festivals around the world make the difficult decision to deliver their programmes online. Festivals have had to adapt to alternative ways of working, connect differently with audiences and find new ways to try and replicate the communal, celebratory viewing experience they are known and loved for.

This year saw the first virtual edition of Borderlines Film Festival, the UK's largest rural film festival which takes place in venues across Herefordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire and the Marches.

The Borderlines programme normally comprises one third previews, one third new releases and a final third made up of retrospectives, special screenings, thematic strands and live events. The festival has had as many as 80 different films and events taking place in the past, but this can't be replicated in an online space; so the number of films was reduced to 34 in total, with two films debuting each night across 17 days.

Given the prevalence of new release films on various digital platforms, we also decided that the programme would be almost entirely made up of previews, to give Borderlines a certain amount of exclusivity and to avoid any danger of shifting release dates. This resulted in a programme that included 32 previews and two brand new releases, as well as post-screening Q&As with directors and talent.

Borderlines has a strong reputation in the film industry and is recognised by the BFI as a festival of national significance, and whilst securing previews from the studios is often challenging (even more so as a virtual festival due to piracy concerns), we were able to secure an exclusive premiere of Florian Zeller's *The Father* from Lionsgate, which has since gone on to win several BAFTAs and Academy Awards and proved to be the best attended film of the festival.

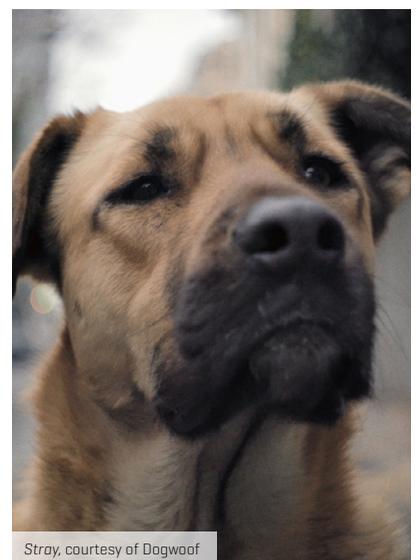
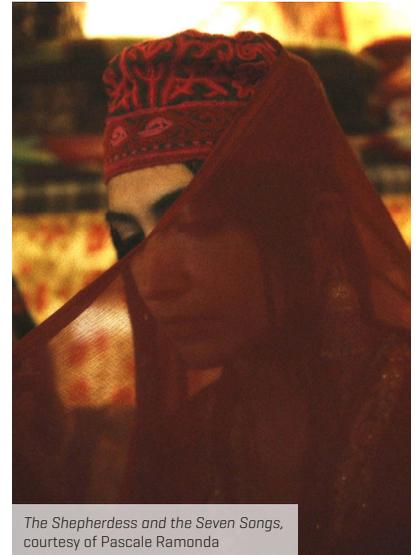
The move away from programming current releases allowed us the opportunity to showcase titles without UK distribution alongside higher profile

previews that would help to draw in a broader range of audiences. Films such as first-time filmmaker Yoon Dan-Bi's *Moving In* and Byambasuren Davaa's *Veins of the World* sat alongside Lee Isaac Chung's award-winning *Minari* and Kelly Reichardt's festival favourite *First Cow*.

The online element also enabled us to secure introductions and Q&As with directors and other talent, which proved an invaluable way of helping the audience engage with the communal aspect of the festival, even when watching from home. In fact, hosting virtual Q&As gave Borderlines the benefit of appealing to filmmakers who might not have been able to attend the festival in person; and this year we were able to host conversations with filmmakers internationally as well as across the UK, including a Q&A in India for Pushpendra Singh's *The Shepherdess and the Seven Songs*. Rapid improvements in video call technology made this both easier to achieve and more acceptable to both talent and audiences, and this is one element of online events we would like to continue going forward.

This year's virtual edition had a much wider reach than usual, and as programmers, we had the unique challenge of curating a festival that served Borderlines' traditional audience whilst also appealing to a new, UK-wide demographic who were able to 'attend' for the first time. Ultimately, this first virtual edition demonstrated the benefits of being able to appeal to a much broader audience, and we were delighted to achieve a geographic spread of viewers across the UK – from Cornwall to Caithness.

Perhaps most importantly, Borderlines' virtual screenings have made the Festival more accessible than ever before for all audiences, removing barriers to attend that exist for many when it comes to physical screenings. With this in mind, it's very likely that we will continue to curate a virtual programme alongside in-person screenings for future editions of Borderlines to both develop its audiences and support the potential for new online innovations in the future.



Most attended films at Borderlines

Film

- 1 *The Father*
- 2 *Minari*
- 3 *Ammonite*
- 4 *Limbo*
- 5 *First Cow*
- 6 *Herself*
- 7 *How to Be a Good Wife*
- 8 *Veins of the World*
- 9 *Martin Eden*
- 10 *Stray*

27.8%

of respondents from the post festival survey said this was their first time attending Borderlines

16.5%

of respondents had not heard of Borderlines before this online edition



TOTAL ADMISSIONS FOR THE FESTIVAL WERE 15,814

TICKETS WERE BOUGHT ACROSS 800 DIFFERENT POSTCODES



Herself, courtesy of Picturehouse Entertainment



Minari, courtesy of Altitude



Veins of the World, courtesy of Global Screen



Limbo, courtesy of MUBI



Martin Eden, courtesy of New Wave



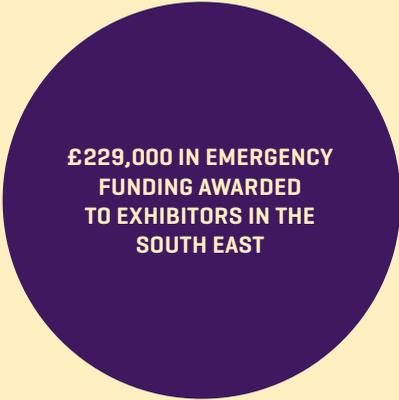
Ammonite, courtesy of Lionsgate



First Cow, courtesy of MUBI

Film Hub South East

*The ICO has managed Film Hub South East since 2018.
Throughout the pandemic, we have supported our
members both financially and strategically, helping them
navigate an extremely challenging 2020 and early 2021.*



**£229,000 IN EMERGENCY
FUNDING AWARDED
TO EXHIBITORS IN THE
SOUTH EAST**



Courtesy of Hailsham Pavilion

Early on in the pandemic, we refocused our Film Hub South East work on one key mission: to help our members access enough emergency funding to survive. At the start of the national lockdown, we signposted them to online resources and information we and the wider industry produced to assist them in navigating venue closures. We reallocated over 70% of the Hub activity budget to emergency funding and offered bespoke support to members facing existential financial challenges. We converted our Young Film Programmers' (YFP) Network to an online series called Intermissions, which included an online viewing group programmed by Network members and online Industry Sessions giving our YFP the opportunity to talk directly to people working in film exhibition and related professions. In February 2021, we delivered our first virtual members' Forum.

BFI FAN COVID-19 Resilience Fund

In April 2020, we launched our first emergency fund in conjunction with the other Film Hubs. Providing grants to film exhibitors in critical financial need as they faced months of uncertainty, the fund was designed to ensure they could survive the closure period and provide diverse and inclusive cultural offerings to audiences once they could safely reopen. We received 18 applications to the BFI FAN COVID-19 Resilience Fund and approved 16 for support, allocating £143,000 overall.



BFI FAN COVID-19 Resilience investment for Creative Arts East will make a significant difference to our survival, both this year and next. This year it will allow us to balance the books, maintain employment for our staff and continue to support our network of 64 community cinema groups with remote training and digital programming. Crucially, this investment affords us the time and capacity to move out of a financial firefight for 2020-21 and begin looking to and preparing solutions for the medium and longer-term challenges that we are facing alongside our colleagues in the wider arts and cultural sector.

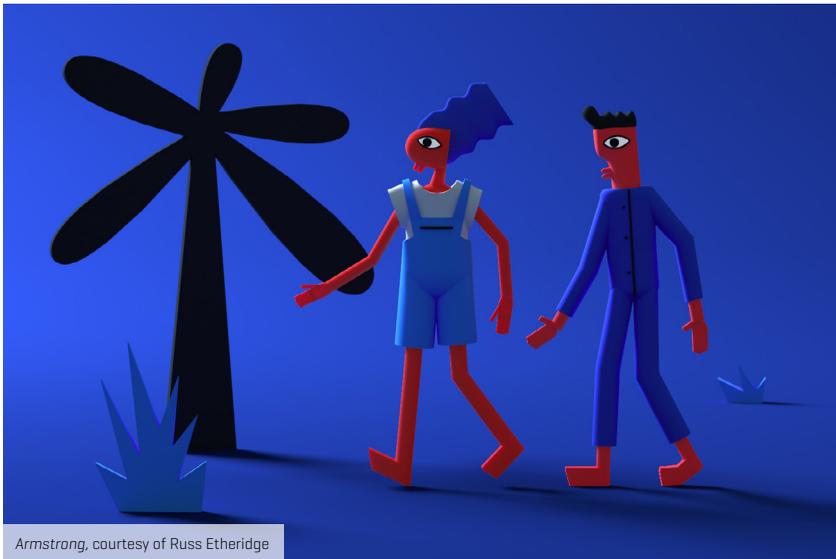
- Natalie Jode, Executive Director of Creative Arts East

Film Exhibition Fund

In August 2020, we launched our second emergency fund to support Film Hub South East members to resume their cultural film programming and re-engage a broad and diverse range of audiences as they navigated reopening. We received 20 applications and all were awarded support, totalling £86,000.

BFI Culture Recovery Fund

In trying to assist members to access as much financial support as possible to remain resilient throughout COVID-19, we encouraged our members to apply to the BFI's Culture Recovery Fund. We offered an application review service for members' draft proposals before formal submission to the BFI, providing feedback and guidance to ensure a strong case for support was put forward. In Round 1 of the Fund, 52 venues from the South East were supported, resulting in over £3.5m in funding for our region.



100%

of attendees said that they achieved what they wanted from the event and would recommend it to others

Film Hub South East Forum

In February 2021, the Film Hub South East Members Forum returned in a revised, online format giving all FHSE members access to training, networking and information-sharing opportunities. The programme was developed using members' feedback on the support they needed to face continued unprecedented challenges across the sector. After posing the key questions organisations needed to ask themselves in order to rebuild and reopen, our aim was to help members answer them through a range of presentations, panel discussions, peer-to-peer learning and bespoke training.

Topics included keeping in touch with audiences, programming in a pandemic, national FAN opportunities, online screening platforms for beginners, mental health awareness for distribution and cinema exhibition, and best practice for reopening. We were delighted to be joined by speakers from organisations across the film exhibition sector and beyond including Dolly Mental Health, Filmbankmedia, the Gulbenkian, Indigo, Queens Film Theatre, Ultimate Picture Palace, and our FAN colleagues from Film Hub Midlands, Film Hub North, Film Hub Scotland and Film Hub Wales.

We were also delighted to showcase films made by filmmakers in the region, commissioned by BFI NETWORK South East. The showcase featured nine short films exploring a variety of genres including *Armstrong*, a fantasy animation directed by Russ Etheridge and *Blank Shores*, a sci-fi drama directed by Alex Kyrou.

“

A wonderful, friendly, and informative conference.

- Film Hub South East Forum 2021 attendee

Enjoyed the range of sessions and chance to interact with peers in breakout groups.

- Film Hub South East Forum 2021 attendee

So, you
watch
films all
day?

Young Film Programmers' Network

With our Young Film Programmers' in-venue work on hold, we continued to engage with and support the YFP Network with our new Intermissions series of activities. These included an online viewing group with films programmed by members, and online industry sessions designed to give our Young Film Programmers the opportunity to talk directly to people working in film exhibition and related sectors to find out more about what their work involves. Topics included film programming (with speakers Isabel Moir and Heather McIntosh, ICO), film journalism (with Ryan Gilbey, freelance film journalist), distribution (with Bryony Forde, Theatrical Sales Director, Altitude Film Entertainment) and the role of independent cinemas and film festivals for filmmakers (with John Maclean, director, *Slow West*).

As the year continued and a regional tier system and further lockdowns were introduced, we responded with a package of online training, events and

networking opportunities to support all venues, organisations and individuals in the Network, regardless of which stage of reopening they were in.

We resumed our industry sessions with a range of experts from across the film exhibition sector addressing different aspects of programming, including:

- LGBTQI+ and the Queer Gaze (Melanie Iredale, Sheffield Doc/Fest)
- Youth Programming (Megan Mitchell, Matchbox Cinema)
- Disability on Film: Access and Inclusion (Lizzie Banks, Oska Bright)
- Short Films & Activist Cinema (Philip Ilson, London Short Film Festival)
- The Female Gaze: Women in Film (Jo Duncombe, British Council)

We also welcomed the return of our online training sessions for YFP facilitators, providing a space for networking and inspiration with guest speakers from across the region and beyond.

476

attendees have been welcomed to our YFP Intermissions series so far

“

It was brilliant, very informative and gave me inspiration and a little boost to keep on during these strange times. Thank you.

- Intermissions attendee

Fantastic – nice to hear people's journeys and how they got to where they are and more about what they do in their jobs.

- Intermissions attendee



BFI NETWORK

Film Hub South East continues to work with BFI NETWORK to provide support for new and emerging filmmakers across the region. The vast majority of UK film talent is still sourced and developed in London, and we are working specifically to find and support talent outside of the capital, which we believe is vital in broadening who has the opportunity to participate and what gets seen on screen.

The BFI NETWORK team for the South East is made up of Tom Wightman, Talent Executive and Abiola Rufai, BFI NETWORK Officer. Thanks to National Lottery funding throughout the pandemic, they have been able to offer advice to regional filmmakers on their creative development; hold regular events across the region to encourage networking, filmmaker collaboration and skills development; and recommend filmmakers for BFI NETWORK funding.

Project Labs & Talent Meet Ups

In the past year, Film Hub South East led the way in moving our events programme online, starting with a series of talks with writers, directors and producers including Aneil Karia, Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor and

Koby Adom. These talks – watched by hundreds of viewers and recorded for future audiences – were pivotal in shaping how the rest of our programme for the year would work. We offered regular Script Mixers, meet-up opportunities offering talent the chance to connect with other film creatives, share ideas and hopefully form teams to apply for BFI NETWORK funds in the future. We also held regular one-to-one surgeries with our Talent Executive across the region, plus two extensive programmes for writers and producers building on the success of similar labs and events held the previous year.

For our short film development programme we received 122 applications and were able to offer 11 writers/directors the opportunity to develop a script, with the support of industry mentors. From the previous year's programme, four attendees have been successful in applying and gaining funding from BFI NETWORK.

Following the success of our day-long Producers Lab in March 2020 and the demand from emerging producers, we partnered with Sophie Reynolds, Helen Simmons and Loran Dunn of Producers'

800

We welcomed over 800 attendees at our BFI NETWORK South East online events programme

Roundtable to deliver a more extensive producers programme online. We initially aimed to support ten producers with the programme, but increased this to 19 due to the high standard of the applications received.

With a focus on transitioning from shorts to first features, the attendees benefitted from online sessions featuring a host of industry experts and established producers who shared practical knowledge, tools and tips around various areas of the producing process including development, finance and legal considerations, pitching, marketing and distribution, how to position themselves and sustainability.

We've continued to work closely with partners across the region including Focal Point Gallery, Lighthouse, Bute Street, Carousel and Marlborough Theatre.



Blank Shores, courtesy of Sixty Clicks Productions

Filmmakers supported

In total, so far we have funded 38 filmmakers across the South East as part of BFI NETWORK: 32 short films and six early development treatments. We have built a strong reputation for identifying emerging talent with little or no previous filmmaking experience as well as supporting a wide and diverse range of voices. Our slate covers horror, sci-fi, drama and comedy.

We're particularly proud that through our outreach, we are attracting more people to the funds and exceeding our inclusion targets. Through our partnership with Carousel in Brighton, for example, we have been able to support more disabled talent at the start of their careers.

COVID-19 delayed production through 2020 but it has now picked up again, with 22 films going into production so far since February 2021. We expect all these films to be completed by autumn 2021, and will continue to support the filmmakers through festival screenings and online showcases.



Without the financial support from the BFI NETWORK, my short film BLANK SHORES simply wouldn't have been realised.

– Alex Kyrou

Although lockdown was obviously a very isolating experience, the process of finishing my short film, THE COST OF LIVING and having such great communication with BFI NETWORK throughout the course of the project really helped me feel connected and stay on track. I really had a great experience with BFI NETWORK South East.

– Alice Trueman

Data and Evaluation

Film Hub South East has overall responsibility for Data and Evaluation for the wider BFI Film Audience Network (FAN), and in 2019-20, a new Research and Evaluation Manager role was created to oversee a renewed evaluation strategy.

However, the unexpected circumstances of the pandemic prompted a shift from evaluating audience-facing activity to an examination of FAN's broader value as a support network with a unique function within the independent exhibition sector.

BFI FAN quickly pivoted its support to providing emergency funding to help members survive venue closures and transfer cultural programming online. During this period, FAN demonstrated its value beyond supporting audience-facing activity and ushered in a new focus for its evaluation as a key industry support network. FAN's response to COVID-19 will be published later this year.

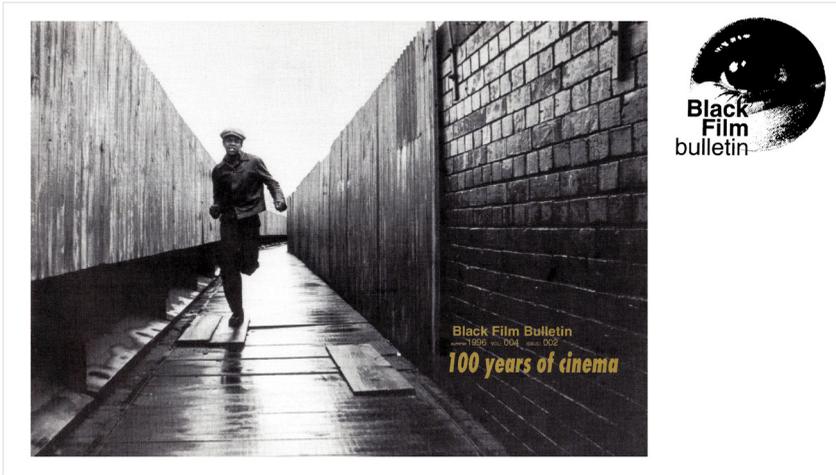
Another consideration during this time was how FAN members could safely survey visitors without using paper forms, which became a potential health and safety risk. Reflection on this risk and a desire to streamline how we manage audience data across the whole of FAN has motivated us to adopt a new digital audience surveying system for use by all FAN members. The new system collects audience data directly into a database that the Hubs and the BFI can all access – tracking data as the year progresses and providing members with real-time reports so they can benefit from prompt feedback on who attended their FAN-funded activities and how they felt about their experience.

Advice, information & consultancy

The ICO offers free advice to exhibitors of all sizes and at every level of expertise across the UK. In addition to the detailed resources available on our website and blog, we answer individual enquiries via email and over the phone.



**1,500 ENQUIRIES
ANSWERED IN 2020-21**



Courtesy of Black Film Bulletin. A series of articles about its revival featured on the ICO blog

31,000+

Over the past year, the blog pages have received over 31k page views and over 20k unique views to date

The ICO offers free, impartial advice to the public via telephone, email and our website resources. We consistently receive and answer a wide array of enquiries each week and give the most clear and practical advice we possibly can, whether we are helping someone put on their first screening, book a back catalogue film, source projection equipment or open a full theatrical cinema.

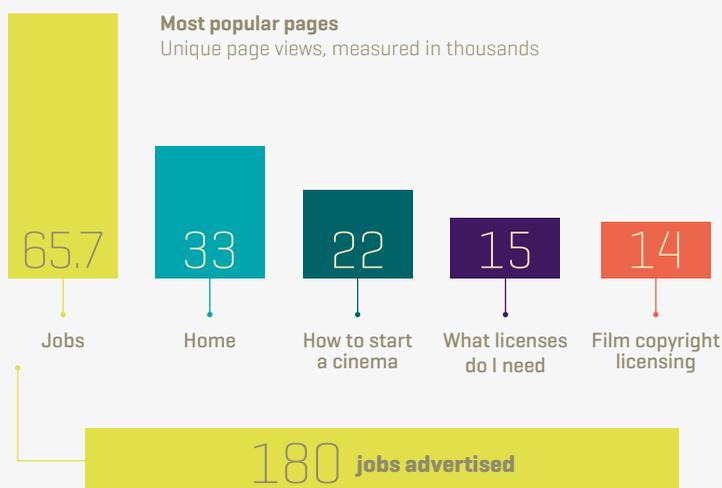
However, this year was a bit different. 2020 was obviously incredibly difficult for everyone, including those working in the hard-hit arts sector, and this was unsurprisingly reflected in the enquiries we received. Following the onset of COVID-19, the first lockdown and the closure of cinemas, we began receiving a high volume of enquiries from exhibitors and cinema workers facing existential economic losses and looking for a central portal for advice, contacts and potential avenues of support. With physical venues closed, we also heard from people hoping to continue screening films in alternative ways – such as through drive-in screenings, on virtual platforms or via online watch-parties.

As well as answering individual enquiries, we decided to refocus attention on our blog and online resources to ensure they not only offered comprehensive COVID-19 support, but also inspiration for those hoping to use the lockdown as a period

of evaluation and future thinking. We wanted to help exhibitors step back, review their current activities and question what was working for them (their organisations, teams, audiences and communities) and what wasn't; supporting them to consider new possibilities for everything from their programming and audience development strategies to their approach to accessibility and the potential of online screenings.

We increased the number and frequency of our blog posts from once a month to almost once a week to promote sector support and maintain communications with those isolated from their workplaces and colleagues. We decided to focus our blog strategy on two key themes, organisational renewal and anti-racism, and began a 'Manifesto' series calling for a reinvention of the way we think of cinema, with contributors sharing their personal vision of what the future of film exhibition should look like – looking anew at areas including pricing accessibility, prioritising inclusion and how to properly value caring labour for both cultural workers and local communities. We delivered a series on Black cinema, with an in-depth interview series on the return of the *Black Film Bulletin* magazine; and added a prominent call for contributors to our blog page to help attract a wider variety of voices to this space.

Most visited online resources



1,552

downloads of our new online guides so far

We published pieces that delivered a picture of what was happening at the forefront of exhibition, both in terms of practical advice for operating during COVID-19 (including a piece on further considerations for exhibitors reopening in mid-2020, in which we suggested customers might be asked to wear masks ahead of it being made mandatory) and innovation in digital spaces, including documenting how UK and European film festivals had successfully moved their events online.

In our online resources section, we collated and disseminated essential information right from the start of COVID-19 – firstly, with a comprehensive list of COVID-19 resources, then a similar list of restrictions specific to cinemas. We circulated details of the BFI Culture Recovery Fund and BFI FAN COVID-19 Resilience Fund and encouraged exhibitors to apply. And, though many ICO staff were on furlough for much of 2020, we used time that might otherwise have been spent delivering other activities to add to our downloadable web guide series. This year we produced detailed guides on [marketing, audience development, film projection](#) and [good](#)

[governance](#) – this last guide designed to aid cinemas looking to steer their organisations as professionally and effectively as possible post-pandemic.

These resources are now available online alongside our existing guides, including our much-used [‘How to Start a Cinema’ guide](#). Full of expert insights into all aspects of opening a theatrical venue, this remains our most visited resource; followed by our section for newcomers to non-theatrical exhibition, [‘What licences do I need’](#) and our [‘List of distributors’](#); a directory of key UK independent, mid-size and international studio distribution companies with contact details.

Finally, though recruitment obviously decreased this year, we continued to publish jobs and opportunities at the ICO and from across the industry on our website’s free-to-use jobs board. Our website’s most popular page, it includes roles and opportunities in UK film exhibition, exhibition-related organisations and occasionally, key distribution companies. We list roles ranging from entry level positions through to cinema and festival directorships; with all jobs posted sent out in a free daily email alert to subscribers.



Courtesy of Phoenix Leicester

Consultancy

The year in ICO consultancy was characterised by the volume of urgent requests for advice and information from cinemas and film festivals responding to the changing landscape for film exhibition during the pandemic. By contrast, there has been an absence of larger, more typical consultancy projects, indicating that for cinema organisers (community groups, local authorities, enterprising individuals alike) there was little opportunity to initiate longer term projects in 2020-21; and that many of the projects the ICO had contributed to prior to this period were put on hold for the duration.

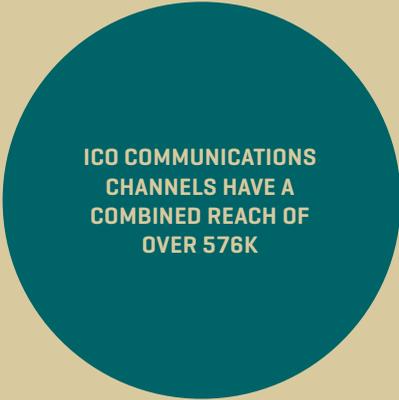
We advised a large number of cinemas and festivals through one-to-one surgeries and general advice sessions, most often to help think through short-term issues and provide some steers through the changes of practice in the industry brought forward by the pandemic – answering questions such

as: how should cinemas become COVID-secure, are cinemas viable operating at reduced capacity, how do cinemas rekindle public interest in screenings after months of home viewing on demand, and what will be the impact on independent cinema exhibition of the diminishing theatrical window? In particular, ICO consultancy supported a number of film festivals to deliver their events online during the period of cinema closures, and to explore longer term potential for online programming even after they have returned as venue-based events.

It has been a year in which ICO consultancy has supported cinemas and festivals in devising solutions to overcome immediate issues, whilst at the same time, helping them put into place a range of measures to ensure they emerge from the hiatus confident that they can remain viable and continue to fulfill their cultural purpose.

Marketing

At the ICO, we create and disseminate regular content across our communication channels including updates on all ICO activities; latest news from industry partners; guidance and support for the film exhibition sector; and regular pieces spotlighting underrepresented voices in film and cinema and platforming anti-racist work. The pandemic has seen our digital channels become even more important as we weren't able to connect with our audiences in person.



**ICO COMMUNICATIONS
CHANNELS HAVE A
COMBINED REACH OF
OVER 576K**

Growth across our social channels, with followings of:



Social

Connecting with our audiences digitally has been imperative with activity mostly focused online during the pandemic. As part of our social media strategy we focused a lot more activity on Instagram, using this as an active recruiting tool for online training sessions and webinars.

E-newsletters

We have over 8.9k subscribers on our e-newsletter mailing list. This list is broken down across segmented groups interested in our film releases, training courses, Screening Days, job alerts and blog updates. We have an engaged list with an average open rate of 39% (industry average is 20%). The marketing team has worked hard to implement A/B testing across all e-newsletters to better track subject line data and improve engagement with content.

Website

In the last year our website has attracted over 825k page views; 533,372 of which were unique. Our most popular pages were the jobs page and advice and support section.

Blog

Again, to respond to an increase in digital demand we increased the number and frequency of our blog posts from once a month to almost once a week, publishing 39 pieces to promote sector support and maintain communications with those isolated from their workplaces and colleagues. Over the past year, the blog pages have received over 31k page views and over 20k unique views to date. We decided to focus our blog strategy on two key themes, organisational renewal and anti-racism – to read more about the blog please see the Advice, information & consultancy section of this guide on pages 42-43.

Our top ten popular blog posts were:

1. [Drive-in cinemas in post-lockdown UK](#)
2. [Further considerations for independent cinemas when thinking about reopening](#)
3. [Living and working with BPD – a navigational guide](#)
4. [European film festivals going virtual: a defence strategy or a new opportunity?](#)
5. [Marketing in a pandemic](#)
6. [How Flatpack took their festival online during the Coronavirus crisis](#)
7. [Cinemas and VOD platforms join forces to combat COVID-19](#)
8. [Understanding the concerns of Black cinema goes as lockdown eases](#)
9. [Reopening Europe's cinemas: part one](#)
10. [Manifesto 05: Welcoming people who are working-class and/or in poverty](#)

Looking forward

As cinemas begin to reopen we are waiting in hopes that audiences feel confident and safe in returning after the time invested by organisations in making sure that this is the case.



After a year in which the pandemic has so starkly illuminated the inequities that exist in our communities, we are also hopeful that we will see some changes in the independent cinema landscape. It is incumbent upon all of us to challenge those inequities and ensure that all audiences are served by the stories we show, that everyone feels welcome in our venues, and that we explore ways of offering hybrid online and in-person programming to those who prefer to participate virtually in our work.

We need to properly engage with the issues of safety and transparency for all workers, to ensure that there are proper structures to support them when things go wrong, and that we provide safe spaces for those who experience bullying or harassment. There is a lot of work to do – the devastation wrought by COVID-19 has exposed fault lines that have existed for decades. Now is the time to work together to make lasting change and invest in structures that empower and include rather than disenfranchise and exclude.

The virtual world (although frustrating at times, and not what those of us who love cinema would have chosen!) has reminded us of the power of cinema to bring communities together, to transform lives, to provide support in times of mental and physical struggle and to nourish us. Changes in distribution patterns, to theatrical windows and the proliferation of online platforms will bring their own challenges and it remains to be seen how they will impact on the business models that have been in place for decades.

However, with change comes innovation, and the independent sector is often the place where innovation begins. It is a resilient sector, driven by people who love cinema and all its possibilities. At the end of a year like no other, we are looking forward with hope as cinema is still very much here – an experience like no other.



About the Independent Cinema Office

The Independent Cinema Office (ICO) was founded in 2003 with a vision of giving everyone the opportunity to see life-changing cinema on the big screen. The ICO is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. We are based in London but our work is national with a goal to help create an open, thriving and challenging film culture everywhere in the UK. In March 2020 we moved into our first office premises in Bermondsey, purchased with the help of Charity Bank and Big Issue Invest. Our work wouldn't be possible without the help and support from our partners including funders, distributors, cultural organisations, our clients, and most especially cinemas.

Launched with three members of staff and £120,000, the ICO now employs 20 members of staff and has an annual turnover of £1.5 million. The ICO is committed to a film industry that is inclusive and reflective of everyone in society. We are working towards this goal with all our activities, as well as our own staffing and structure, and have adapted our working patterns and delivery of activities to function effectively during the pandemic.

Our funders & partners

The ICO is proud to partner with a variety of national and international agencies and funders to deliver our ambitious programmes. The BFI has supported the ICO since its inception and is now a major funder of programming, information and training services to the independent exhibition sector through a range of activities. We run Film Hub South East, one of eight national hubs in the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) tasked with supporting audience development across the UK. Our other major partners are Creative Europe and the British Council (who support our portfolio of activities supporting European film festivals), ScreenSkills (who support our professional development projects) and Arts Council England (who support our artists' moving image projects).

Our Board of Trustees

Dorothy Wilson (Chair), Independent Consultant, Coach & Producer

Sudha Bhuchar, Actor/Playwright; Co-founder, Tamasha Theatre Company & Artistic Director, Bhuchar Boulevard

Thea Burrows, independent film producer

Julian Connerty, Partner, Signature Litigation LLP

Susan Lovell, Head of Career Development, BBC Leadership and Development

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Simon Ward, Owner, Palace Cinema, Broadstairs

To hear more from the ICO,
[sign up to our mailing list](#)



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