



INTRODUCTION

As I near the end of my tenure as Chair of the ICO Board, this is the last time I will have the pleasure of introducing the ICO Annual Report. While I prepare to pass the baton to a new Chair, it's a privilege to reflect once more on the ICO's tireless work in championing cultural cinema and in creating pathways for audiences to find the best films, supporting creative talent to reach its potential and helping to build a sector that is more equitable, inclusive and sustainable.

I'm proud to have watched and helped guide the ICO's continued growth and expansion over the last nine years. During that time, we've supported the sector in many ways, both large and small, in weathering an exceptionally challenging environment. While significant challenges remain, I leave the ICO confident that it will continue to be a powerful advocate, an imaginative leader and a reliable partner to everyone who shows, makes and loves film.

I hope you enjoy reading about our work in 2024-25.



DOROTHY WILSON ^{MBE}
CHAIR OF THE BOARD
INDEPENDENT CINEMA OFFICE

INTRODUCTION

The ICO continues in our mission to champion the broadest range of cinema and to develop audiences, venues and talent across the UK. We have always believed that this sector does extraordinary work nurturing new talent, building communities at the grassroots and bringing the best of world cinema to audiences everywhere.

This year, our voice is starting to be heard more clearly. We have intensified our advocacy role, submitting additional evidence to the parliamentary committee investigation into the Film and TV industries. In their report, we saw the deserved recognition of the importance of independent film exhibition, with some key recommendations that we hope to see taken forward and put into action.

Our ICO research reveals significant challenges for the sector in achieving financial stability and being able to serve their audiences as effectively as they would like. The pressing need for capital investment in independent cinema venues has risen to the top of the agenda. Our recent survey suggests that it threatens the future of many exhibitors who are unable to maintain and develop their sites, to respond to climate change adequately and be more accessible for all. We continue to make the urgent case for capital investment both publicly and privately. We do so, believing that, given the right investment, our sector has huge potential for growth

and could further unlock creative, social, and economic growth of communities across the UK. This report is full of examples of independent cinemas and film festivals already achieving just that.

We see in so many areas of activity whether it's in the dedicated work of our programming clients, the success of the Spotlight programme in building partnerships and stimulating cultural activity in Peterborough, the regional work we support through Film Hub South East, the curators who answer our Open Calls for Screening Days events or the new BFI FAN CON that we organised in Belfast this year, examples of independent film organisations bringing creative programmes and events to life and reaching new audiences in innovative ways.

Every year, I'm given fresh optimism for the future of independent cinema from the talent in whose development we are lucky to play a role. This year, I've found it in the emerging programmers in our flagship Cultural Cinema Exhibition course, the young filmmaking talent coming through the BFI NETWORK and Film Academy funds, and in the brilliant participants in our REACH Strategic Audience Development training, to name just a few.

We don't do any of this work alone. We're immensely grateful to the BFI and the National Lottery for their ongoing support, as well as our sponsors, partners, clients, the friends who champion our work, and the cinemas, film festivals, community screens, and other organisations that give creative life to our work through their audiences.



If you'd like to discuss anything featured in the report or have a new partnership proposal in mind, please do get in touch: info@independentcinemaoffice.org.uk

CATHARINE DES FORGES
DIRECTOR
INDEPENDENT CINEMA OFFICE

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AUDIENCES

AT THE ICO, WE WANT A WIDER RANGE OF AUDIENCES TO HAVE ACCESS TO THE BROADEST RANGE OF FILMS IN MORE PLACES.

Our overarching aim is to make independent cinema spaces more inclusive and welcoming for all, with ambitious, creative and responsive programming at the heart of everything we do.

We do this through our film programming network of client cinemas, mixed arts venues and film festivals; by delivering our popular Screening Days events comprising film previews and in-depth audience development discussions; by organising culturally significant film tours and distribution projects; and through our work as Film Hub South East supporting local projects.

ICO CLIENT VENUES



BARN CINEMA, DARTINGTON



DERBY QUAD



BROADWAY CINEMA, NOTTINGHAM



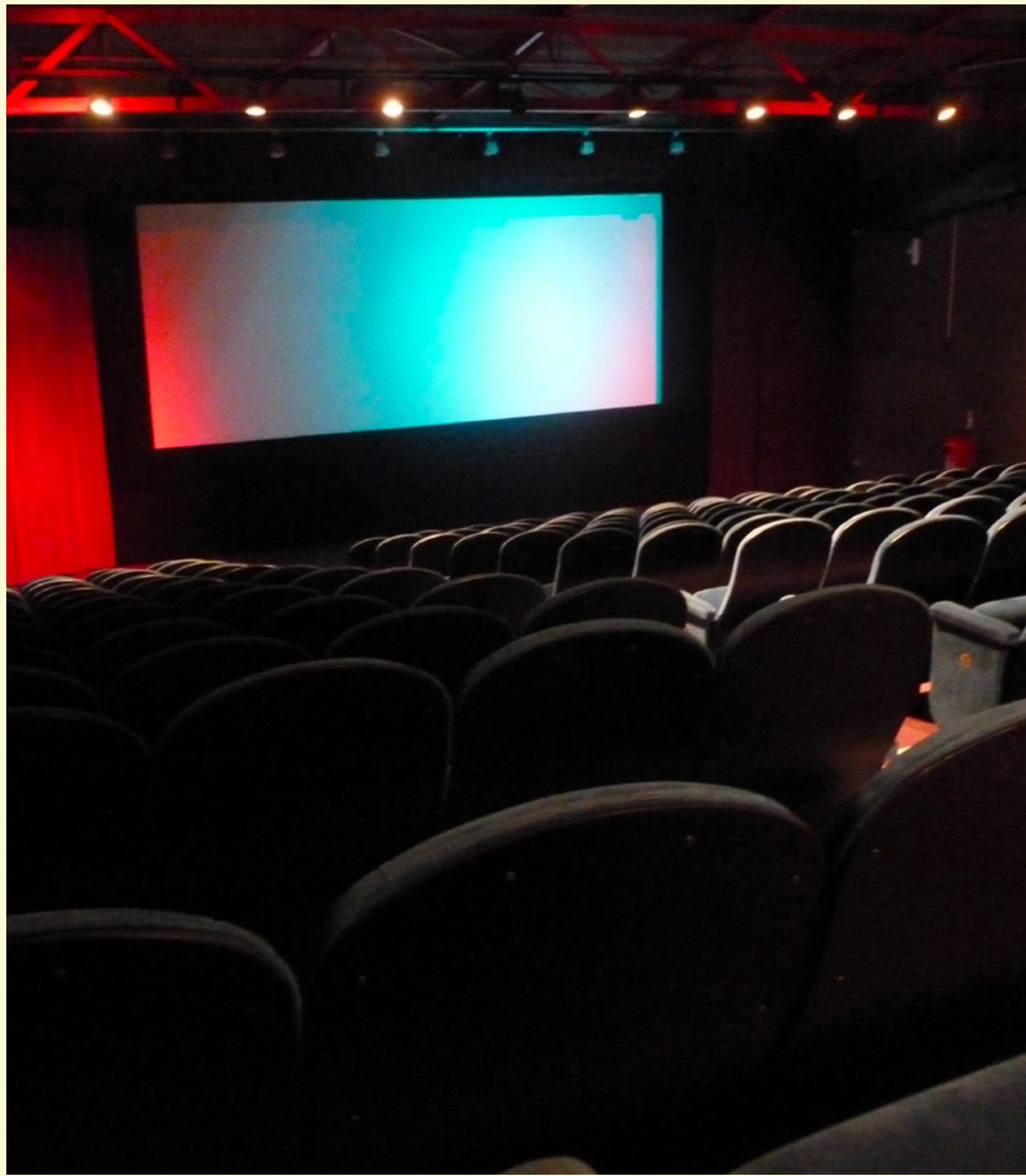
CHICHESTER CINEMA AT NEW PARK



CINEMARSH, NEW ROMNEY



TYNESIDE CINEMA, NEWCASTLE



FORUM CINEMA, NORTHAMPTON

FINDING THE BEST FILMS FOR AUDIENCES

THE ICO PROGRAMMING NETWORK

We work in partnership with nearly 30 venues across the UK, seeking to understand their individual needs and goals and producing diverse, sustainable and bespoke programmes for each cinema and their audiences.

UNIQUE TITLES SHOWN

1,006

TOTAL ADMISSIONS

884,085

GROSS BOX OFFICE

£6,536,098

ICO CLIENT VENUES



ACTONE CINEMA, LONDON



GLOUCESTER GUILDHALL



HYDE PARK PICTURE HOUSE, LEEDS



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL



JW3, LONDON

TOP 10 PERFORMING TITLES

AT ICO CLIENT VENUES



A COMPLETE UNKNOWN #1
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£292,954
ADMISSIONS
38,334

BRIDGET JONES: MAD ABOUT THE BOY #2
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£298,029
ADMISSIONS
36,420

CONCLAVE #3
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£277,037
ADMISSIONS
36,246

PADDINGTON IN PERU #4
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£211,624
ADMISSIONS
29,412

WICKED #5
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£197,895
ADMISSIONS
25,033

NOSFERATU (2024) #6
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£143,351
ADMISSIONS
18,954

THE BRUTALIST #7
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£134,313
ADMISSIONS
18,155

SMALL THINGS LIKE THESE #8
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£134,959
ADMISSIONS
17,659

LEE #9
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£136,680
ADMISSIONS
17,437

INSIDE OUT 2 #10
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£108,041
ADMISSIONS
14,298

ICO CLIENT VENUES



LUDLOW ASSEMBLY ROOMS



JAM JAR CINEMA, WHITLEY BAY



MALVERN THEATRES



MAREEL, SHETLAND



KILN THEATRE, LONDON



NOVA CINEMA, WOKING

TOP 10 TOP NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE TITLES

AT ICO CLIENT VENUES



KNEECAP #1
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£69,020
ADMISSIONS
8,937

LA CHIMERA #2
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£55,320
ADMISSIONS
7,725

I'M STILL HERE #3
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£50,401
ADMISSIONS
7,292

VERMIGLIO #4
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£28,876
ADMISSIONS
3,868

ALL WE IMAGINE AS LIGHT #5
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£29,911
ADMISSIONS
3,841

THE SEED OF THE SACRED FIG #6
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£19,334
ADMISSIONS
2,641

MY FAVOURITE CAKE #7
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£18,643
ADMISSIONS
2,501

SISTER MIDNIGHT #8
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£17,233
ADMISSIONS
2,367

MONKEY MAN #9
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£15,257
ADMISSIONS
2,253

THE CRIME IS MINE #10
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£16,049
ADMISSIONS
2,160

ICO CLIENT VENUES



PHOENIX, LEICESTER



HAVERHILL ARTS CENTRE



SHOWROOM WORKSTATION, SHEFFIELD



NORTHAMPTON FILMHOUSE



STAMFORD ARTS CENTRE

PROVIDING CHOICE FOR AUDIENCES

PROGRAMMING TRENDS

The last twelve months can be said to have revealed a new normal for cinema. Many had hoped that the global box office would return to the pre-pandemic yardstick of 2019, though with results 0.1% down on 2023, this now seems like it may remain an elusive target. Box office revenue was 22% lower than in 2019, and admissions were down 28% compared to what can increasingly be seen as an *annus mirabilis*.

Undoubtedly, the consequences of the US strikes were still felt, as production delays hurt the regular supply of marquee titles. But across the market, an all-time peak of 1,114 titles were released to cinemas in the UK, so there was no short supply of material overall. Yet in the wider market, 58% of the box office was generated by the top twenty films. Meaning the majority of the box office is dependent on an incredibly small proportion (1.8%) of the films released. In the cinemas in our



programming network, those same films only contributed 21% of the box office. This highlights our role in offering a genuine alternative to the commercial mainstream and a much wider range of choice. This helps avoid the boom and bust the industry has endured and the complete reliance on tent-pole titles, while also meaning a wider range of narratives reach audiences.

While overall growth has been stagnant, there are two very encouraging signs that point to the enduring appeal of cinema and its future with generations to come: the success of films for children, and youth-oriented programming.



A LATVIAN ANIMATION WITH ZERO DIALOGUE? **FLOW** IS THE KIND OF FILM THAT INDEPENDENT CINEMAS WERE MADE FOR.

£1M+
FLOW GROSS BOX OFFICE

Ensuring that the next generation has a healthy early experience in the cinema is paramount, and it's gratifying to see so many of our venues successfully connecting with children and parents.

Across the sector, titles from major studios such as *Moana 2*, *Mufasa: The Lion King* and *The Garfield Movie* proved bright spots, but it was also promising that new adaptations beyond franchises, such as *Dog Man* and *The Wild Robot*, found strong ground. Independent sites achieved success with titles that bridged children and adults, especially re-releases of Studio Ghibli perennials, *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. Best of all was how Oscar-winner *Flow* captivated audiences. A Latvian animation with zero dialogue? This is the kind of film that independent cinemas were made for, and it was a treat to see this film cross the £1 million mark, with a majority of this coming from indie sites.

Despite widespread declinist narratives about younger people's state of permanent distraction, there was a strong showing from our client cinemas of films whose primary audience were people aged under 26, capitalising on their year-round work with young audiences. Films such as *The Substance* and *Love Lies Bleeding* led the pack as genre-skewing titles featuring stars with strong youth appeal. Bristol's Watershed made the latter standout by hosting an opening night

Butch Bar collaboration (complete with push up competition!). Though some suggest young people are veering away from risqué depictions, the success of films such as *Challengers* and *Babygirl* had plenty to get young people hot under the collar.

Kneecap proved a major arthouse hit with young audiences, and also pointed to another developing trend: the growth of Irish cinema's success. Controversy-magnets *Kneecap* managed to connect with young people with a story of the fight for linguistic self-determination (with plenty of swearing and drug-taking for good measure). Sites with high Irish diaspora audiences, like Kiln in Kilburn, capitalised on the film's visibility to programme Irish language film seasons. But the call of Irish cinema also extended to *Small Things Like These* (building on the success of another Claire Keegan adaptation, *The Quiet Girl*, and adding the megawattage of Cillian Murphy) and the sleeper hit of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. This John McGahern adaptation (from rising indie distributor Conic) has no stars and simply catalogues the year's passing in an ultra-sleepy rural Irish community. Yet it won the hearts of indie audiences.



▲

IN A DRUG-FUELLED FIGHT FOR LINGUISTIC SELF-DETERMINATION KNEECAP CONNECTED WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, HELPING TO USHER IN A NEW AGE FOR IRISH CINEMA.

£1.95M
KNEECAP UK & IE BOX OFFICE

Recent years have seen record lows in investment in British independent film production. Yet stories from British directors focusing on specifically British narratives and a diversity of British identities are central in the venues we work with. A new film from a stalwart of British screen such as Mike Leigh is always a cause for celebration, and *Hard Truths* (which reunited him with *Secrets & Lies* lead Marianne Jean-Baptiste) delivered a strong performance. Similarly contemporary, though softer-centred, was starry two-hander *We Live in Time*. Films such as *Blitz*, *The Critic* and *Lee* continued a more traditional strand of heritage filmmaking, offering new perspectives on the past. Outside of the independent market, six of the top ten films in our client venues were UK productions or co-productions with franchises such as *Bridget Jones* and *Paddington*, as well as prestige titles *Lee* and *The Brutalist*, connecting strongly with audiences.

ICO CLIENT VENUES



TOWNER EASTBOURNE



ELECTRIC PALACE CINEMA, HARWICH



WARWICK ARTS CENTRE, COVENTRY



WELLINGTON ORBIT, TELFORD



STOKE FILM THEATRE, STOKE-ON-TRENT



WATERSHED, BRISTOL

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES WITH A NEW CLIENT VENUE

CASE STUDY: STAMFORD ARTS CENTRE

We began working with Stamford Arts Centre in the spring of 2024. Drawing on a rich heritage dating back to the 18th Century, Stamford Arts Centre is a single-screen (166-seat) multi-arts venue. The cinema runs part-time in conjunction with the theatre, which means that every bit of space in the programme needs to be capitalised on to ensure that the programme is achieving its goals.

When they joined the ICO programming network, Stamford Arts Centre recognised that they were reliant on older audiences whose attendance was steady but had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They were keen to develop provision for new younger audiences, and over the longer term, family audiences. They were also hoping to grow audiences for arthouse and cultural film, allowing them to programme a broader range of films and be less reliant on commercial titles.

Once we started collaborating with their team, one of the first structural changes we made was to reduce the programming lead time from two months to one month. Booking so far ahead, often before distributors had finalised their release plans, restricted what films were available to book. Reducing the programming lead time allowed us to screen films much closer to release date,

capitalising on press and the initial excitement created around releases. Working with the Stamford Arts Centre team, we aimed for a balanced mix of saturation releases, cross-over titles and select arthouse titles. Growing an arthouse audience doesn't mean filling a programme with only arthouse films. It's about enticing audiences in and gradually introducing them to new titles over time – it requires patience and strategic programme planning, as well as a consistent curatorial voice.

We were all keen to give consistency of choice within the programme, by giving each film at least three screenings in different timeslots, so different types of audiences could attend according to their needs. Additionally, we extended films across more than one play week, which helped local word of mouth to grow and build audiences.



YEAR-ON-YEAR INCREASE IN BOX OFFICE IN FIRST YEAR

£33,000



“
*The Stamford Arts Centre
is an absolutely fantastic
and vital venue. It is a lifeline
for me. Thank you.*

Our strategy to grow an arthouse audience has been to try a more commercial ‘anchor’ film each week to help sustain the venue financially, a quality cross-over title, and then a smaller specialist title.

The aim is to cater to all their target audiences, whilst also not alienating any of them. It’s a delicate balance and important not to lean too heavily into any one audience demographic making sure they all continue to feel welcome. As a result, Stamford have noticed a loyal and consistent new audience coming to these arthouse titles.

Younger audiences have also increased with the earlier access to commercial titles and specific genre programming, for example experimenting with programming horror films such as *Longlegs* that successfully attracted in a walk-in teenage audience. Family programming has also been slowly introduced around school holidays,

gradually building successful audiences for titles such as *Moana 2* and *Mufasa: The Lion King*. A year in, and the results have been significant, pointing to a strong future for a mixed programme at Stamford Arts Centre. The programme is now very well balanced with some commercial product, a wide range of cross-over titles, and plenty of arthouse content. Year-on-year analysis showed an increase in box office from £127K in 2023-24 to £160K in 2024-25 (a 26% increase), with real momentum building around cultural titles such as top-performing *Conclave* which we were able to negotiate an early preview of to celebrate the 30th anniversary of cinema at Stamford Arts Centre.

— HIGHLIGHTS – FEB 2025 —



COMMERCIAL ‘ANCHOR’
MUFASA: THE LION KING
GROSS BOX OFFICE ADMISSIONS
£2,165 404



QUALITY CROSS-OVER
THE BRUTALIST
GROSS BOX OFFICE ADMISSIONS
£2,635 439



SMALL SPECIALIST
VERMIGLIO
GROSS BOX OFFICE ADMISSIONS
£1,000 165

FINDING THE BEST FILMS FOR AUDIENCES

SCREENING DAYS

Our Screening Days events provide cinemas with the best opportunity to preview the widest range of films for their audiences.

Our two national Screening Days, Autumn and Spring, showcase a broad range of films from across the globe, allowing cinemas to enrich their programme with what they feel will inspire and engage their audiences. Alongside the film previews, we run Audience Development Day, a dedicated space for theatrical venues to come together to share and build expertise in engaging new audiences.

Our specialist events, Archive Screening Days and Inclusion and Diversity Screening Days, focus on previews that will appeal to specific audiences and connect audiences with our rich cinematic heritage. They also include expertly curated sessions and workshops that help invigorate cinemas’ audience development in those areas.

NEW DELEGATES

22%

UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS

331

UNIQUE ATTENDEES

734

60

75% OF FILMS SCREENED WERE MADE AVAILABLE TO WATCH ONLINE

60% OF FILMS SCREENED HAD DESCRIPTIVE SUBTITLES

48% OF FILMS SCREENED WERE FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILMS

38% WERE MADE BY BLACK, ASIAN AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE FILMMAKERS

33% OF FILMS SCREENED WERE DIRECTED BY WOMEN

27% OF FILMS SCREENED WERE BRITISH FILMS

2024 was a high watermark for the number of films released in the UK, with 1,114 films for cinemas to choose from. Yet against this backdrop of growing options, the percentage share of box office held by the top twenty titles has risen. The types of people making these films are not representative of the make-up of our communities, with just 16% of the global box office top 100 directed by women (to take just one example). Advocating for cinemas to consider a broader range of options is therefore more essential than ever.

This is where our Screening Days conference steps in. Helping elevate the best UK indie and world cinema releases that are the key point of difference for independent cinemas, we offer cinemas a chance to come together, spend dedicated time watching the films that are most relevant, and create thoughtful plans about how to engage audiences for them. Even in the age of the digital screener, it can be hard to find time to watch the hundreds of options open to cinemas, let alone travel to London-centric distributor screenings. ICO programmers curate the key releases and share them with hundreds of cinemas from around the country. We invite distributors to give insights into their release plans to help form routes to new and existing audiences.

Screening Days is not just about advocating for independent cinema; it's about advocating for the audiences that might want to engage with it. With our programming, we always focus on a progressive selection that is at least a third by directors of colour and/or disabled directors. We also aim to make the industry more inclusive for exhibitors and audiences by commissioning new descriptive subtitles that we then return to distributors free of charge to use in their campaigns.



“A brilliant programme and venue, these events are incredibly important to me as a programmer.”



“
*The team did a great job
of making the events very
welcoming and inclusive.*

TOP 10 FILMS BY AUDIENCE SCORE AT SPRING + AUTUMN SCREENING DAYS 2024-25

#1
THE
MARCHING
BAND



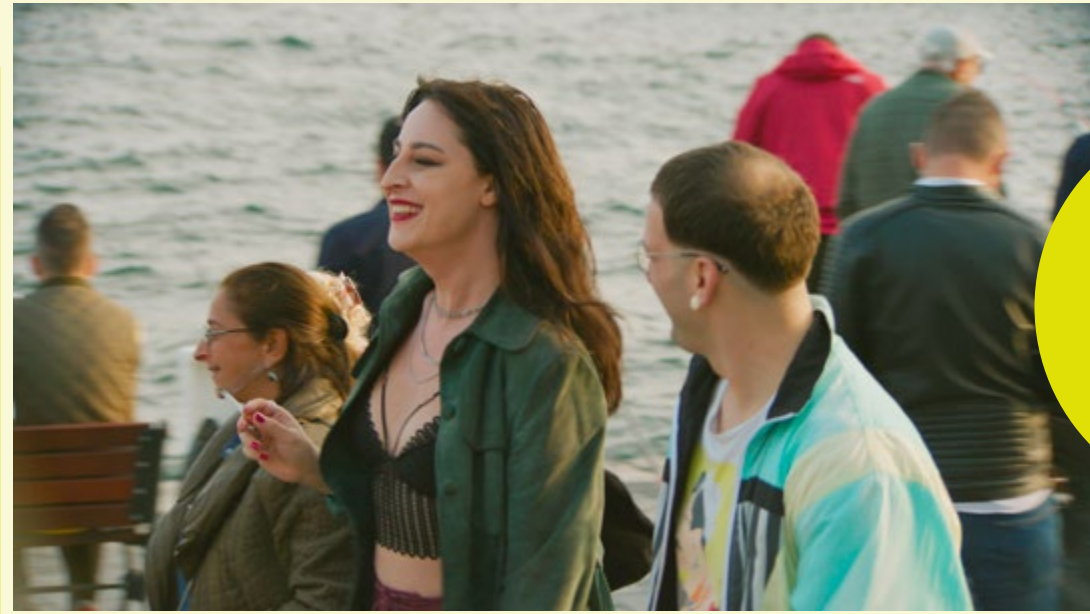
87%

#6
THE QUEEN OF
MY DREAMS



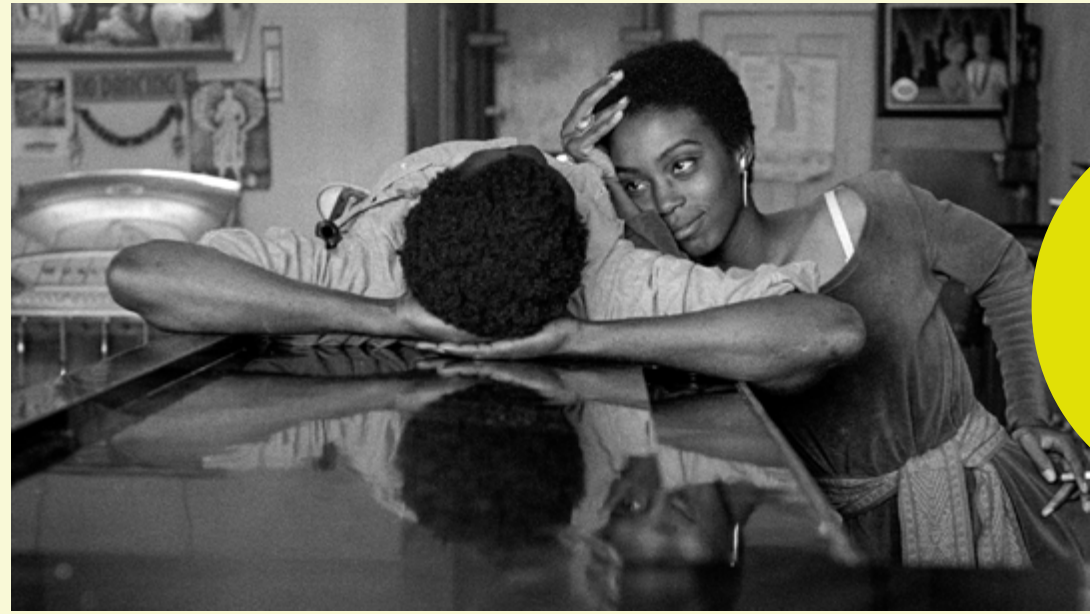
80%

#2
CROSSING



86%

#7
BUSHMAN



79%

#3
NICKEL
BOYS



83%

#8
FLOW



76%

#4
THE
BRUTALIST



82%

#9
ERNEST COLE:
LOST & FOUND



75%

#5
THE SEED
OF THE
SACRED FIG



81%

#10
A REAL PAIN



74%

MAP OF THE

331

ORGANISATIONS
AT SCREENING DAYS
2024-25



“
Really well-organised and curated events.”



AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT DAYS

As cinema emerges from a once-in-a-generation threat, the need for shared solutions to shared problems is more immediate than ever. Exhibitors have an increasing workload, and the opportunity to step away from our desks, gather, and rethink is increasingly scarce. Excellent work is being done to reach new audiences, and it's those venues that are experimenting with new ideas and iterating practice that are finding success.

“*Loved hearing the case studies and getting to know the people behind the spaces.*”

Our biannual Audience Development Days are meetings open to theatrical exhibitors where mutual sharing becomes the base for better results for all. We always feature three case studies on core topics from cinemas across the country, offering windows into where the best work is being done on essential areas for indie cinemas to consider. We also offer our top-level viewpoint from our ICO programming team, who are responsible for a broad spectrum of 29 independent venues. The team offer presentations on trends and approaches that are finding success. Finally, we offer audience trends from audience insight agency Indigo, who work with hundreds of mixed-arts venues and can offer snapshots of how audiences are behaving and the place that they want cinemas to take in their lives. A lively space for discussion and for new approaches, the attendees have become a cohort who are driving change in their venues and reporting back on where their interventions have led them.

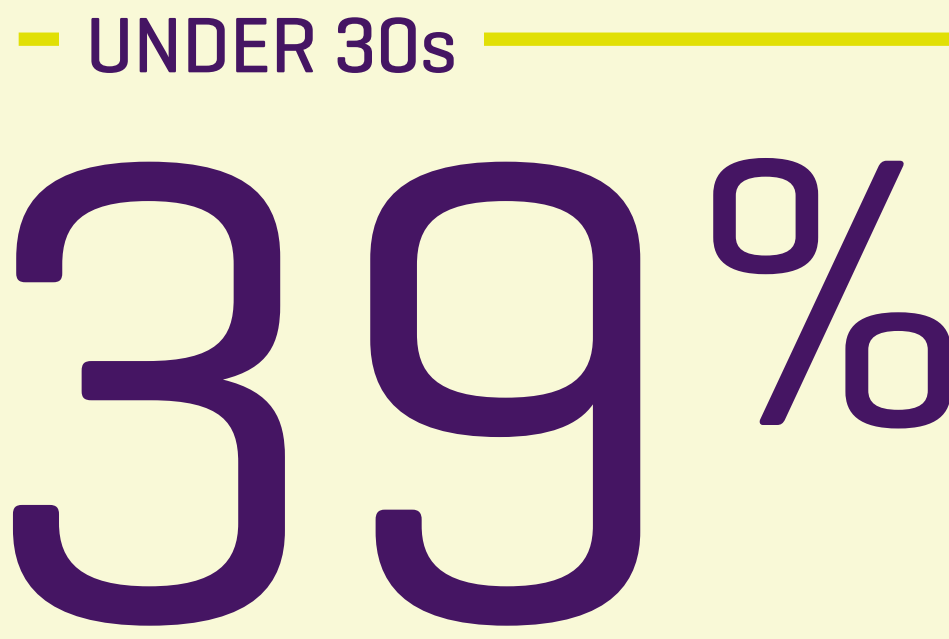
ID SCREENING DAYS

Inclusion and Diversity Screening Days ask a simple question: how can we ensure that the broadest possible range of people in our communities can have life-changing experiences at the movies?

Against a global backdrop of attacks on inclusion and diversity progress, our interventions in this area become all the more necessary. If we want our cinemas to offer a warm welcome, a broad range of films that speak to everyone’s experiences, and be physically accessible and comfortable for all, we need to think carefully about how they’re shaped.

Our sessions were designed to help exhibitors of all kinds strengthen their commitment to diversity and inclusion. We curated three sessions in-house, with three more selected from our open call. Our film programme reflected the key upcoming releases that offer specific routes into excluded or underserved audiences in indie cinemas.

There were 155 attendees at ID Screening Days from 92 different organisations. We were pleased to welcome lots of new attendees and younger people to the event, with one third coming for the first time and 39% who were under 30 years old. 100% of delegates rated the overall event organisation and venue as excellent or good in their feedback on the event.





“
*Highly knowledgeable and
important voices that knew
what they wanted to say.*

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #1

PROGRAMMING PROGRESSIVELY AND RESPONSIVELY IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Programmer Nadia Maria Oliva and Watershed CEO Clare Reddington discussed organisational resilience and staff support mechanisms to help cinemas contribute to the conversations that matter during fraught political times.

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #2

CREATING A NEURODIVERSE CINEMA

Writer Lillian Crawford hosted a panel on what cinemas can do to better support neurodiverse audiences, with speakers covering their experience curating for autistic audiences from an autistic perspective and hosting relaxed screenings.

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #3

“I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW YOU COULD DO THAT FOR A JOB”: WIDENING SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION IN OUR FILM WORKFORCE

FAN Socio Economic Champion Linnea Pettersson led discussions in a workshop format on how to build a workforce that reflects the socio-economic backgrounds of everyone in our society.

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #4

FOR US, BY US: CASE STUDIES IN WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

Speakers from SWITCH Bristol and Derby’s Feel Good Film Club shared their detailed approach to building events for specific audiences, prioritising the experience and preferences of specific groups over outsiders’ assumptions.

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #5

RADICALLY OPEN CINEMA SPACES

Hosted by the ICO with speakers from Storyhouse Chester, the Star & Shadow Cinema and City of Sanctuary UK discussing how to make our venues more open and supportive spaces, both physically and in outreach.

ID SCREENING DAYS SESSION #6

CURATING CRIP CINEMA: WELCOMING DISABLED AUDIENCES BEYOND ACCESS

Cinema Archive curator Emily Simmons explored the urgent need to fully engage disabled audiences in cinema and offer authentic depictions of disability on-screen, using her new online archive as a case study.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS

The last few years have seen an explosion of interest in repertory cinema. While there are multiple forces bringing new audiences to old films (including the pandemic swerve away from new releases, the rise of internet discovery platforms like Letterboxd and a rising breadth of excellence in archive curation including Widescreen Weekend, Cinema Rediscovered and BFI’s Film on Film festivals), ICO has been pursuing film’s back issues for years.

We were delighted to travel to one of the UK’s most beautifully restored cinemas, Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds, whose commitment to archive films of all stripes in their programme made hosting the event here extra special.

Our sessions gave a sample of the exciting breadth of what showing old movies to the public can mean, whether it’s about sharing untold stories, exhibiting film on its original medium or reconsidering yesterday’s ‘trash’.

Archive Screening Days attracted 144 attendees from 75 organisations, representing a real mix of theatrical venues, archives, non-theatrical organisations and freelancers. 34% were aged under 30, and 32% were attending for the first time. 100% of attendees rated the overall event organisation and venue as excellent or good in their feedback on the event.

UNDER 30s

34%

UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS

75

ATTENDEES

144

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #1

100 YEARS OF 16MM: STILL THE MOST ACCESSIBLE FILM FORMAT?

Facilitator **Louise Conway** presented case studies exploring how 16mm continues to democratise who can make, project, and exhibit film on film, after 100 years of development.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #2

SCREENING THE UK’S HIDDEN ARCHIVES

To highlight a new resource produced by Film Hub NI and BFI FAN Screen Heritage Champion **Andy Robson**, we looked at case studies of exhibitors who have collaborated effectively with some of the UK’s best non-traditional archives.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #3

HORROR, HORMONES AND VENUE HIRE: EXHIBITING TRANS FILM IN DUBLIN

James Hudson from Dublin’s Small Trans Film Club described how his DIY group worked with traditional venues to build a fun, sexy, dynamic community space exploring marginalised histories, with screenings of films dated 1937 to the present day – on zero budget.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #4

HOW TO FRAME ARCHIVAL GENRE AND EXPLOITATION FILMS

Programmer **Erin Wiegand** and other independent curators discussed how best to contextualise genre and exploitation films in a way that is both enticing and ethical.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #5

FILM IS THE NEW VINYL

Robin Baker, programme director of the 2023 BFI Film on Film Festival, discussed the opportunities and challenges of screening film from film and how to engage audiences – from creating ‘event’ cinema to maximising engagement.

ARCHIVE SCREENING DAYS SESSION #6

AUTHENTIC DISABLED HISTORIES ON-SCREEN

Film Programmer and Accessibility Advocate **Florence Grieve** led this session exploring questions like: How can we present films that portray inauthentic or offensive representations of disability, and build a new canon of historical films about and by disabled people?



“*I loved the mixture of sessions and films, the guest speakers were interesting and engaging and the programme was too!*”



“
*I have made vital connections
with others in the industry.*”

— DATES FOR 2025-26 —

SCREENING DAYS

YOUNG AUDIENCES
HOME – MANCHESTER & ONLINE

2025
9-11 JULY

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY
MAC – BIRMINGHAM & ONLINE

2025
9-11 SEPTEMBER

AUTUMN
PHOENIX – LEICESTER & ONLINE

2025
14-23 NOVEMBER

SPRING
BFI SOUTHBANK – LONDON & ONLINE

2026
13-22 MARCH

PIONEERING FILMS FOR NEW AUDIENCES

DISTRIBUTION

We distribute films to UK cinemas for the cultural benefit of UK audiences. Across ICO history we have focused on providing access to films that have been largely unknown or unavailable to UK audiences.

One of our focus areas is on African cinema. Undoubtedly the continent of Africa contains some of the world’s best filmmaking, but access to this work in the UK lags significantly behind. We hope by providing access to more African films it will reorient the focus of cinephilia beyond Europe and the United States.

This year we worked in partnership with Mosa Mpetha of Cinema Africa! and Tatenda Jamera of Maona, as part of their wider audience development pilot project to help the richness of African cinema reach the diaspora and wider audiences.

Working with curators Mosa and Tatenda, ICO supported the theatrical re-release of the South African classic of guerrilla filmmaking, *Mapantsula*, an anti-apartheid crime story, timed to coincide with the 30th Freedom Day anniversary, the first free vote in South Africa.

Thanks to this timely curation, the knowledge of the curators for potential audiences and the connections we have with cinemas, the film toured to 31 venues across the UK with three

director Q&A screenings, reaching a wide range of audiences, many of whom were likely experiencing it on the big screen for the first time.

This marks a new working model for ICO: collaborating with expert partners who bring deep knowledge and strong audience connections, to deliver projects that resonate more meaningfully with the broader communities served by cinemas.

After the year-long tour, we extended the availability of *Mapantsula* beyond its initial distribution window.

We are keen to seek new partners to work with on distribution projects, especially with groups with links to specific audiences, helping them connect with cinemas and in turn, with audiences at greater scale than they might reach alone.



▲
**MAPANTSULA MARKS A
NEW WORKING MODEL FOR
ICO: COLLABORATING WITH
EXPERT CURATORS WHO
BRING DEEP KNOWLEDGE
AND STRONG AUDIENCE
CONNECTIONS**

HAVE A DISTRIBUTION PROJECT YOU’D LIKE TO PARTNER WITH US ON? CONTACT [INFO@INDEPENDENTCINEMAOFFICE.ORG.UK](mailto:info@independentcinemaoffice.org.uk) TO DISCUSS.

30+
UK CINEMA SCREENINGS

INCREASING AUDIENCE CHOICE

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

As the lead organisation for Film Hub South East (FHSE), part of the BFI Film Audience Network, our main ambition is to increase access and expand choice for audiences in the South East by supporting exhibitors to present the broadest range of independent international and British films to audiences.

We're able to support exhibitors directly through the Film Exhibition Fund and the Art of Action nationwide season and our geographically-targeted work in underserved areas through the Spotlight programme, but our work in helping film exhibitors connect with audiences also includes building peer-to-peer networks like the well-established Film Hub South East Programming Group and the new Shorts Festival Group.

TOTAL FUNDS AWARDED BY FHSE 2024-25

£220,017

FILM EXHIBITION FUND PROJECTS SUPPORTED

32

ART OF ACTION PROJECTS SUPPORTED

11

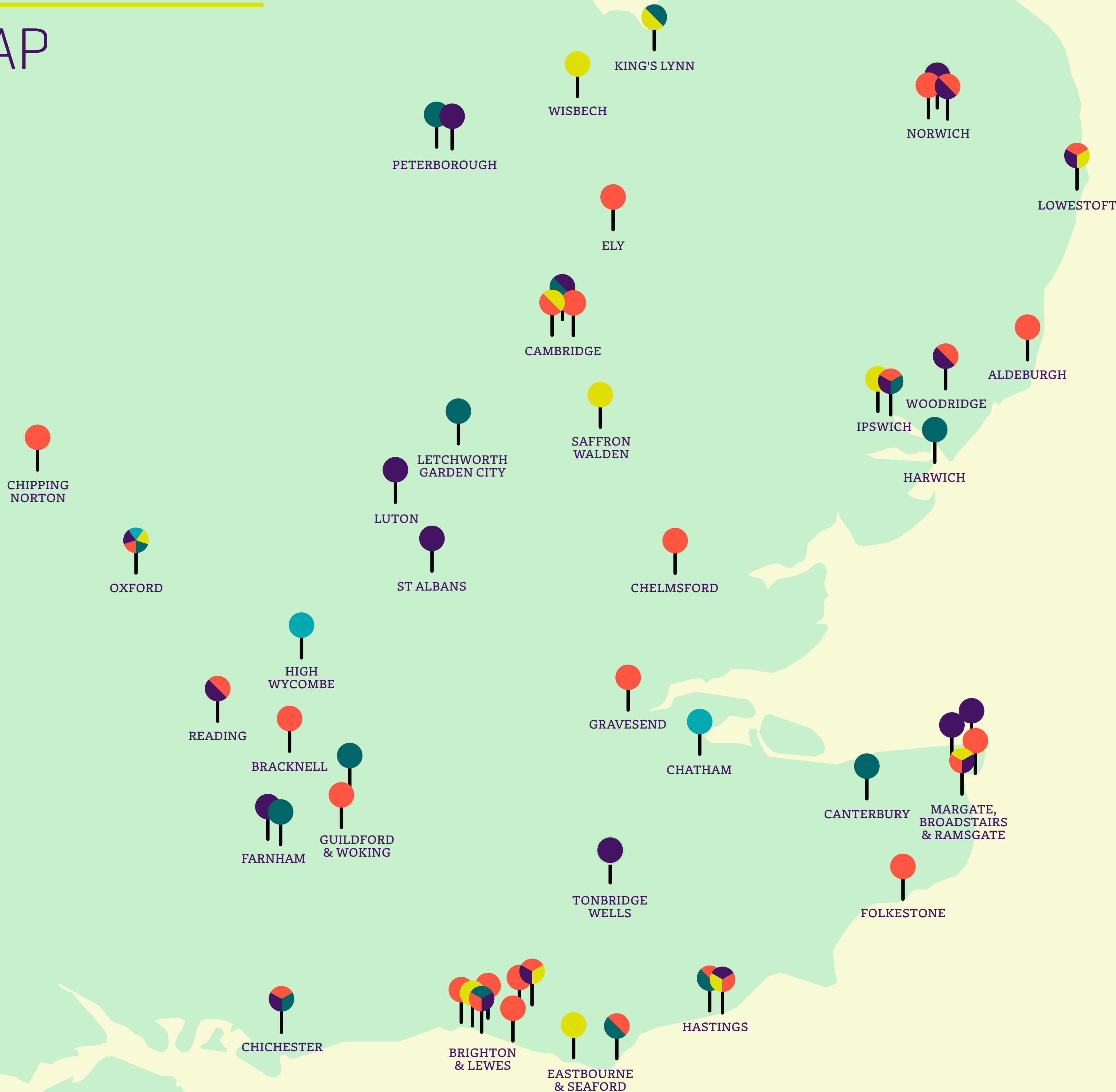
FHSE IN-PERSON ADMISSIONS

61,628 ↑ 18%

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

FUNDING MAP

- BURSARIES
- FILM EXHIBITION FUND
- ART OF ACTION
- WORKSHOPS
- LIBRARIES



“
*We feel very lucky to be
part of such an active
hub, with genuine care
and support behind it.*

WATERSPRITE FILM FESTIVAL

FILM EXHIBITION FUND

The Film Exhibition Fund (FEF) is our primary mechanism for supporting exhibitors across the South East in delivering cultural film programmes to broad and diverse audiences. This year, 32 projects were supported, totalling £186,647 of National Lottery funding.

Screenings took place in nearly every county in the South East, with 58,758 people attending, an 18% increase on 2023-24. Member events featured everything from silent film concerts and drag shows to outdoor family screenings and collaborations with food banks, refugee groups, and neurodivergent communities.



“
*We would not exist or be able to continue
benefitting audience members without
the invaluable support we receive.*

SUNRISE FILM FESTIVAL

ART OF ACTION

Celebrating sensational stunt work from throughout film history and around the world, the UK-wide BFI FAN ‘Art of Action’ season saw 11 exhibitors from the South East awarded support to programme big screen thrills for audiences.

The season reached over 2,800 audience members in the South East through a wide range of screenings and events. Highlights included Cambridge Film Festival’s Fierce Frames, which included a Michelle Yeoh double bill. In Brighton, Fabrica delivered Creative Action, a weekend film festival of features and animated shorts, as well as workshops and talks. Hastings’ Electric Palace Cinema ran the youth-curated Thrills & Spills Season in partnership with two local sixth-form colleges, including workshops, a podcast, and a poster competition.

The Ultimate Picture Palace hosted “Fight Nights”, a month-long series of screenings and events celebrating East Asian action cinema and its influence, showing classics including *The Raid* and *Seven Samurai*.

The ICO facilitated five Young Film Programmer groups at The Riverside Cinema (Woodbridge), Broadway Cinema Letchworth, Cinema City Norwich, Electric Palace Harwich and Towner Eastbourne to run screenings as part of the season. We hosted sessions for the young people and venue Education Officers to discuss programming, licensing, ticketing and how to eventise their screenings. A range

of titles were selected from *The General* to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* to *Smokey and the Bandit*.

The ICO also collaborated with the popular Kung Fu Movie Guide podcast to tour four seminal titles from notable directors, accompanied by live podcast events (a useful way to connect with younger audience members). Working with Gulbenkian (Canterbury), Depot (Lewes), Nova (Woking) and Ultimate Picture Palace (Oxford), we hosted expert guest speakers, including journalist Christina Newland, founder of free running Sebastian Foucan, stunt coordinator Jude Poyer, among others.



“
It was so good to see action films being credited as more than simply mindless-popcorn-shovelling-films.”



FHSE PROGRAMMING GROUP

Our Film Hub South East Programming Group continued to grow, bringing together 31 exhibitors to share their experiences in programming independent film and reaching new audiences.

The group met quarterly and reviewed the latest upcoming British independent and foreign language films, documentaries, family titles, archive films, artists' cinema, and more. They also heard from organisations such as Small World Cinema, which led a popular session on family programming.

“
I definitely feel part of the Hub, especially since joining the Programming Group last year. It's comforting to chat with like-minded cinema operators.

FHSE SHORTS FESTIVALS GROUP

Film festivals and organisations that programme short films, either exclusively or as a strand to complement feature programming, often have a keen interest in developing relationships with and providing opportunities to emerging talent.

They also often screen unique content that isn't offered through traditional production and distribution routes and is more representative of our local communities. However, funding support primarily focuses on feature films and audience development, which presents shorts programmes in particular with many challenges.

This year, in an effort to address some of these challenges, we established the Shorts Festivals Group. The Shorts Festivals Group allows organisations to network, share knowledge, hear from specialists, and strengthen their connection to filmmakers who have been awarded funding through BFI NETWORK. Meetings take place four times annually, and the membership themselves have identified areas in which they feel they would most benefit from support. We're in the early stages of running this initiative, but so far have held meetings on topics including approaches to securing sponsorship, and best practice for structuring a business model. In the future, we plan to cover marketing and more. We currently have 11 active members, with representation from Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Kent, Suffolk, and East Sussex.



“
***We feel very much a part of the network.
There is always a space for a generous
exchange of information and ideas.***



“*Spotlight has helped to show me what’s possible with film screenings and creating such events in the city.*”

SPOTLIGHT

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

Spotlight is our targeted investment programme focused on addressing geographical gaps in cultural film provision in the South East.

Community groups play a key and driving role in delivering the programme. In the scheme's second year, we have continued to partner with the Gateway Film Festival, which has expertly led the project in supporting 12 community groups to deliver 220 screenings, reaching 12,669 people in Peterborough.

Many of the community groups are new to film exhibition and receive support, mentorship, and equipment to deliver screenings tailored to their communities with the support of Gateway. A “mini-network” of Spotlight partners has formed, sharing kit, ideas, and audience development strategies.

Two partners from the programme spoke at the annual FHSE Members Forum, underlining how successful the project has been in engaging local communities. Culture Community shared their approach to hosting Black heritage film screenings for young people, and Nene Park explained how they set up an outdoor screening series for family audiences. Both groups shared insights on building partnerships locally and leveraging those relationships to secure funding and meet community needs.



SUPPORT FOR DIVERSIFYING AUDIENCES

UK-WIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to supporting member exhibitors through funding schemes and nationwide seasons, we also help them to build the knowledge and skills needed to engage a wider range of audiences. As the lead partner for training and events within the BFI Film Audience Network, the ICO plays a key role in helping member exhibitors develop these skills. This year, we delivered this through the inaugural BFI FAN Conference - BFI FAN CON - alongside our audience development and film programming training courses.

BFI FAN CON

BFI FAN CON, the first BFI FAN conference, was designed for film exhibitors from across the UK to gather and draw inspiration on new ways to reach and engage audiences for diverse screen culture. Hosted in Belfast (11-13 September), it brought together over 150 exhibitors from across the BFI Film Audience Network.

In programming the conference, we wanted to put the BFI Film Audience Network membership front and centre to celebrate the amazing work they do in their communities. The membership were keen to share their experience and expertise with over 50 submissions to the Open Call for the conference programme, representing a huge diversity of projects and ideas and showing a great appetite for sharing learning.

The distinctive cultural context of Belfast undoubtedly added to the sense of exploration and exchange. The first time a large-scale BFI FAN event had taken place in Northern Ireland, we were brilliantly supported by Film Hub NI and hosted by the iconic Queen's Film Theatre (QFT) and the historic Queen's University Belfast.

Throughout the three days of activity, there was a real sense of peer-to-peer learning through audience development case studies from the successful BFI FAN-supported projects and a strengthening of the professional network in independent film. Chances for the UK-wide sector to come together are infrequent, and we were fortunate to have such an engaged and motivated group, representing a real variety of types of film organisations and with representation from every BFI FAN region and nation.



“
It provided practical strategies for engaging diverse audiences, which is crucial for our goal



“
The insights gained are immediately applicable to our work. We'll be implementing new outreach initiatives based on what we learned.

We programmed 21 sessions and workshops over the two main days of the conference, spread out across three parallel spaces, meaning attendees could select the issues that most aligned with their audiences and priorities.

Expert speakers joined us to talk about AI, contemporary collecting in the Archive, key insights from the Revisiting Your Cinema Business Model training course, while the BFI, Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA) and Escapes all updated us on key sectoral initiatives.

Case studies from BFI FAN members included sessions on film festival year-round innovation and guest curation, learnings from the Spotlight programme, reaching family audiences, people-centred film exhibition, how film can be a force for health and wellbeing and how cinema can play a role in nature restoration. Discussions included tracing the journey through major capital redevelopment, the new wave of interest in repertory cinema, the Irish cinema distribution landscape, and an affinity group discussion for Global Majority delegates

A session on the importance of descriptive subtitles was followed up with wider Deaf awareness training from the British Deaf Association. Delegates got involved practically at workshops on placemaking and branding, and a board game that challenged players to manage the different aspects of a sustainable organisation.

Participants left feeling inspired, equipped with fresh ideas and practical strategies, and motivated to collaborate and innovate in how they built connections with their audiences. Many expressed a desire for continued involvement in future events and emphasised the importance of ongoing support and networking within the industry. 99% of delegates said they would recommend the event to others, and 96% said that they had achieved what they hoped to at the event.

99%
OF DELEGATES WOULD
RECOMMEND BFI FAN CON

REACH

STRATEGIC AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

Attracting new and different audiences is one of the top priorities for members and the wider exhibition sector. As part of our training portfolio, we wanted to help exhibition professionals develop their strategic skills in growing and diversifying their audiences.

REACH: Strategic Audience Development training is a workshop-based, project-driven programme. Every film exhibition project is shaped by its local context and the audience development goals of the organisation - whether it's building audience relationships from scratch in a new project or looking at who is (or is not) in an existing audience to see if deeper connections could be made with different age groups, communities or interest groups. To reflect that, REACH is based around participants preparing a real-life audience development project that they actually deliver for their organisation during the course.

“
The programme has been immensely invigorating, and I feel so much more confident in my role as an exhibitor.

This 5th edition of REACH, funded by the BFI Film Audience Network, ran for six months from March to September 2024 and was attended by ten participants working in independent film exhibition venues and film festivals across the UK. The first module took place in London, presenting successful audience development strategies to reach a variety of different audiences, to inform and inspire the participants to develop their own projects. At the end of this module, delegates were tasked with devising their own audience development project for delivery.

Projects that were realised during this edition of the course included establishing a new young audiences membership scheme in a mixed-arts venue, organising filmmaking workshops for d/Deaf filmmakers, and curating new film seasons with an audience-specific focus, such as world cinema strands or films directed by women. On average, each delegate attracted an audience of 66 people for their project activity, the majority of which were new audiences. One delegate highlighted how their audiences for a particular strand of activity had increased by 55% since their participation in the course.

REACH: STRATEGIC AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT 2025

WE LOOK FORWARD TO RUNNING THE COURSE AGAIN IN 2025, AS WE WANT TO SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS IN THEIR ASPIRATIONS TO FURTHER DEVELOP THEIR AUDIENCES. IF YOU'D LIKE TO PARTICIPATE HEAD TO OUR WEBSITE TO FIND OUT MORE AND APPLY.

EXPANDING CHOICE FOR AUDIENCES

FILM PROGRAMMING ESSENTIALS

As well as making independent cinema spaces more inclusive and welcoming for all, we also aim to support cinemas in becoming more ambitious and creative with their film programming - ensuring it reflects and serves the full breadth of their local communities.

This year we launched our newly designed Film Programming Essentials course for BFI FAN members. The course explored the core skills needed to develop thoughtful, audience focused programmes.

Across three sessions, we welcomed 30 delegates to build their skills in the practical aspects of programming, including film rights, research methods, and strategic planning. The sessions featured presentations and case studies from experienced programmers and audience development specialists from organisations such as the BFI, Ultimate Picture Palace, T A P E Collective, Hyde Park Picture House, Palace Cinema Broadstairs, and the Barbican.

Through the case studies, delegates examined how these organisations have successfully adapted their programming to broaden audience reach, whether by introducing new strands targeting underrepresented groups or by rethinking existing offers to better meet the needs of their communities.

— ATTENDEES WHO ACHIEVED THEIR GOALS IN TAKING THE COURSE —

100%

“
The ideas and lessons flying around were very insightful and inspiring. It made me realise the strengths and scope that my venue holds.

VENUES

THE ICO HELPS UK VENUES BUILD CONFIDENCE & DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS AS DYNAMIC, RESILIENT, & CREATIVE ORGANISATIONS.

Our aim is to make independent cinemas accessible, inclusive and economically and environmentally sustainable by giving them the resources, tools and networks they need to thrive.

To effectively serve audiences independent cinemas must be adaptable, connected, well-informed and well-resourced. The ICO provides expert advice on a vast array of topics to ensure that everyone who wants to can show films. This includes our bespoke consultancy service, blog, jobs board and online guides. Our work supporting venues also includes industry-leading training through our ICO and Film Hub South East work.



RESOURCES FOR VENUES

INDUSTRY INTELLIGENCE

ICO ENQUIRIES

The ICO's free, email-based enquiries service provides venues and exhibitors of all types with crucial sector support. This year, we answered over 1,100 enquiries on topics including the licensing required to put on film screenings, where to book specific titles, how to go about starting a new cinema or developing an existing one, and more.

This invaluable service makes a real impact in facilitating many new community cinema screenings across the UK each year – giving clear, practical information and advice to members of the public planning to show films to local audiences for the first time.

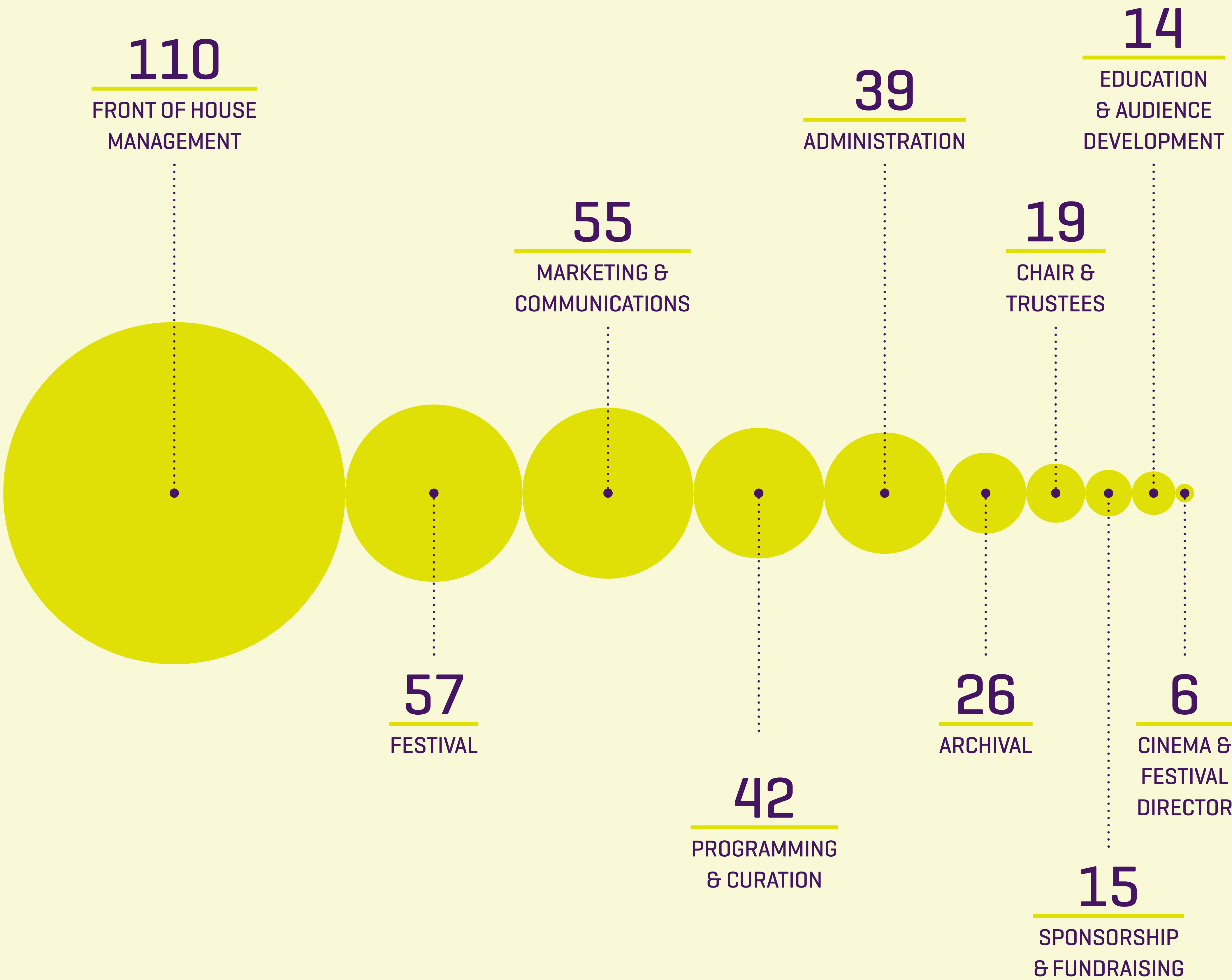
Our website's Advice & Support section extends this support, with a wide range of in-depth resources and downloadable guides available free to users. These include our popular 'What licences do I need' and 'How to start a cinema' resources, with additional topics covered including programming, audience development, marketing, accessibility, and environmental sustainability. This year, we added a practical guide to local film licensing, helping exhibitors navigate showing the many films that don't have classification.

ICO JOBS BOARD

Our free-to-use Jobs Board plays a key role in the independent exhibition sector. Supporting job seekers and employers alike, it's known within the industry as an essential resource for those looking to work within it or attract the best talent.

We posted over 440 jobs this year, circulating them via our daily jobs e-bulletin to a list of 6,500 subscribers and receiving over 195,000 web visits, by far the most popular page on our website.

The opportunities posted included roles from all across the UK and at every level of seniority, from entry-level positions to directorships. We are proud that our posting criteria and recommendations encourage employers to design jobs with more care and to offer greater support to candidates throughout their recruitment processes, helping the sector become more equitable and inclusive. We provide employers access to the greatest range of applicants who bring varied experiences, viewpoints, and problem-solving approaches, which fuels creativity and innovation.



ICO BLOG

The ICO Blog is an important resource for the independent exhibition sector, sharing news and opportunities in a regular monthly round-up as well as publishing articles showcasing examples of best practice in cinema work or raising current issues in the industry. We published 26 blogs this year, reaching over 17,000 readers.

Popular commissioned blogs this year showcased our different editorial priorities for the blog and the broad mix of both established and emerging voices within the film exhibition sector. Jonny Dry showed innovative approaches to crafting communal events at a new, diverse grassroots organisation DAILIES. Yasmin Begum reported on her archival research into the diverse history of Butetown Carnival in Wales and the community screenings that followed. Sami Abdul-Razzak gave an entertaining and informative introduction to the new social media platforms that present opportunities for exhibitors in reaching younger audiences.

Two popular blogs brought accessibility in the sector to the fore, with Sean Welsh from Matchbox Cine and Weird Weekend giving a step-by-step guide to how non-theatrical exhibitors in ‘emerging’ spaces can deliver access to optional audio description and Florence Grieve reporting on her personal experience of the groundbreaking accessibility of the Scottish Queer International Film Festival: SQIFF.

TOP FIVE ICO BLOGS

#1

BUTETOWN CARNIVAL: USING
ARCHIVE FILM TO ENGAGE
A DIVERSE AUDIENCE IN WALES



#2

THE
NEW SOCIAL
MEDIA



#3

CRAFTING
COMMUNAL EVENTS
AT DAILIES



#4

WEIRD WEEKEND:
PROVIDING AUDIO DESCRIPTION
IN NON-THEATRICAL CINEMA SPACES



#5

A WEEK AT SQIFF:
THE JOY OF ATTENDING
A FULLY ACCESSIBLE FESTIVAL



BESPOKE CONSULTANCY FOR VENUES

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

Through our consultancy service, we share up-to-date expertise garnered from the 29 venues and festivals in our programming network and the knowledge that our team holds from decades of working in venues and film festivals, and across distribution.

Typically, we are approached either before a cinema opens or when they need to make a major strategic shift. In either case, we are glad to be able to help shape their strategy, offer sustainable alternatives to a purely commercial model, and support more thriving cultural venues. While each cinema and festival requires a tailored response to what their local audiences want, our working model is consistent in always offering practical application, quality and value for money.

PRACTICAL

Consultancy is only useful if the insights we offer can be applied directly. We know what works beyond the abstract, right down to the finer details that cumulatively make a venue a success.

QUALITY

We work to an agreed-upon brief so that the final product is what everyone expects, providing high-quality reports that are digestible for different stakeholders. Our recommendations are grounded in industry data sources as well as our own anonymised proprietary data generated within our programming network.

VALUE

We can help shape guidance at most budget levels, meaning clients have confidence about where their money will be best spent. Independent cinemas are rarely in a position to deliver major outlays, but building a strong business case for change can unlock major benefits.

It's important for our work together that consultancy clients remain confidential. We are often dealing with sensitive issues or projects that are in long-term development. But our work is as broad as our expertise, and, as a sample, in the last year, we were happy to have:

- Produced a citywide business case and options appraisal for the redevelopment of an iconic regional cinema
- Developed a programming strategy for a regional mixed arts venue to allow them to take their programming in-house
- Validated the feasibility study of a heritage cinema for their new community cinema business model
- Offered audience development strategies for a new D/deaf cinema release



“

After successfully running our annual MINT Chinese Film Festival in Keswick for three editions, I was ambitiously planning to expand our activities into distributing and exhibiting Chinese films across the UK. Duncan's advice offered us insights into the landscape of UK film exhibition and provided useful tips and help in progressing our distribution initiative.

We launched our first Chinese cinema release project led by women, MINT IN CINEMAS: An Unfinished Film, in April 2025. We secured bookings at almost 40 cinema venues and counting!

YIXIANG LIN, CO-FOUNDER AND LEAD CURATOR OF MINT CHINESE FILM FESTIVAL

BUILDING CREATIVE & SUSTAINABLE VENUES

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

As the lead organisation for Film Hub South East (FHSE), part of the BFI Film Audience Network, we support venues and film organisations in the South East with targeted training opportunities to strengthen their in-house skills and ambition and create opportunities to build peer-to-peer networks that promote collaboration and knowledge sharing.

100+

FHSE MEMBERS ATTENDED ONLINE TRAINING EVENTS

DEVELOPING SKILLS

We delivered four online training events for Film Hub South East members engaging over 100 participants. In response to member feedback, which highlighted marketing as a key area of development, we designed and delivered two dedicated sessions to help organisations build their brand.

Firstly, the ICO’s Duncan Carson looked at a broad sweep of marketing essentials: examining ways to re-energise a marketing approach, communicate the overall venue experience and build lasting relationships with audiences. In the second session, Claire Stewart (Watershed) provided an in-depth look at how to maximise the effectiveness of what is for many the single most important channel for reaching and sustaining audiences, email marketing.

In our third session, with speakers from Lazy Girls Film Club and Electric Palace Cinema, we examined how venues can strengthen relationships with film distributors and build repertory cinema into their programme. In the final session of the year, Dr MaoHui Deng of the University of Manchester examined the positive role that cinema can play in the lives of people living with dementia and Mike Riddiford of the Ropetackle Arts Centre, shared his expertise in this area and looked at the practicalities of how venues can start dementia-friendly screenings.

BUILDING NETWORKS

The Film Hub South East Members Forum returned for its 6th edition in March 2025, bringing members together at BFI Southbank to share their experiences from the past year, build up their professional networks and find inspiration to continue developing their venues and organisations.

Attended by over 70 members, the day’s programme had a specific focus on sharing best practice from across the region. Charles Gant gave an excellent overview of the box office landscape and key trends for South East venues to be aware of. The team from Chichester Cinema at New Park and videoclub in Hove provided members with key insights into how they’ve developed new audiences through recent projects with the support of the Film Exhibition Fund. Electric Palace, Hastings shared learnings from the new audience development initiative they’ve implemented to welcome neurodiverse audiences. Suffolk Shorts and the filmmakers from our Short Cut Film Fund programme explored how members can nurture local filmmaking talent in their venues.

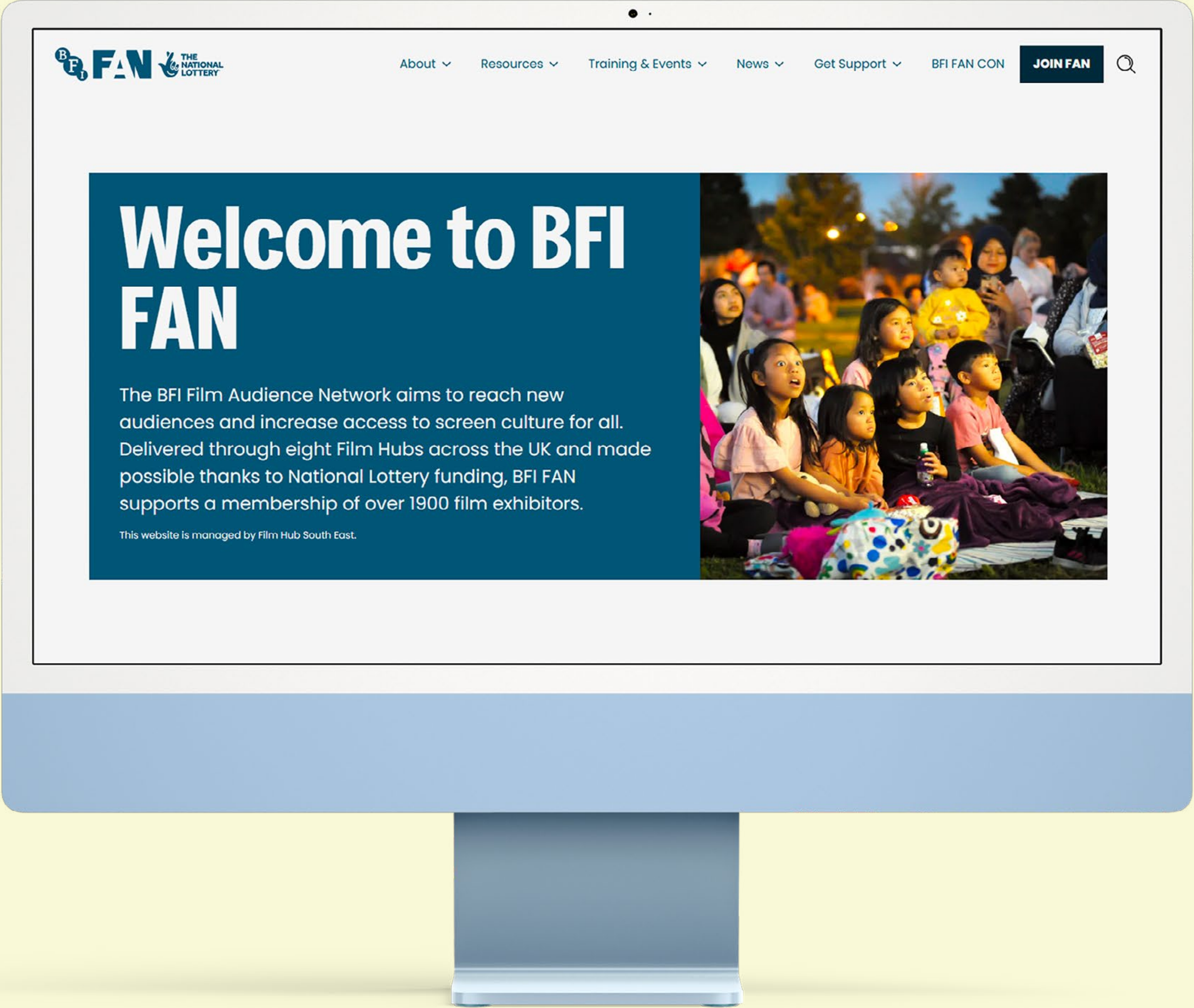


“*The speakers were the most friendly, positive and upbeat people. I felt like I could really engage with them and relate to them personally.*”

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE & ACCESSIBLE VENUES

BFI FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

As the lead partner for delivering training and member communications in the BFI Film Audience Network, we support venues through training programmes to strengthen their financial sustainability, grow there organisations, and embed real accessibility into all areas of their practice. We work hard, in collaboration with the other Film Hubs, to make sure that the wide range of activity happening is communicated to members and this year we were pleased to launch the new BFI FAN website to act as a central point of news, events and resources for the network.



REVISITING YOUR CINEMA BUSINESS MODEL

BUILDING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

For venues to thrive as dynamic and creative organisations for their local communities, they must also be financially sustainable. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, many exhibitors have faced severe financial pressures, compounded by a long-standing lack of access to business training within the sector.

To address this, we developed the Revisiting Your Cinema Business Model training programme, designed to strengthen business acumen and equip venues with the tools they need to build resilience and long-term sustainability.

The programme was delivered across seven modules, combining in-person and online sessions from April to November 2024. Representatives from 13 venues across the UK participated in the training, which explored key topics such as financial planning and reporting, data-driven audience development, and strategies for maximising commercial and earned income.

To provide tailored support, nine expert mentors were drawn from the course speakers and the ICO’s wider network and then matched with participating venues to address their specific business needs. Between

November 2024 and March 2025, each participant received up to three dedicated mentoring sessions.

One of the programme's features that participants valued the most was its strong mix of practical insights and actionable lessons. After participating in the training programme, participating venues have all taken steps forward in their business approach, including working more confidently and effectively with their board, refining the membership scheme for their cinema, and taking a more strategic approach to their current financial model.

“
*I learned different ways
of monitoring finances
and profitability across
all areas of our business*”

— ATTENDEES WHO ACHIEVED THEIR AIMS —

100%

ACCESSIBILITY ACROSS THE BOARD

In the UK, 24% of people are living with a disability, so making sure that our sector is as accessible to and inclusive of them should be a priority for all film exhibitors.

When we think of accessibility, we often think of bricks-and-mortar interventions like changing places, ramps and accessible toilets, which are crucial, but improving accessibility also means new ways of thinking about disability and access, how we design and deliver screenings, employment, staff training, marketing and much more.

Accessibility Across the Board was a new short-form training programme delivered as part of the BFI FAN training portfolio. Led by and developed in collaboration with BFI FAN accessibility champion Charlie Little, and attended by 23 members, the aim was to provide members with the knowledge and insights required to establish their own Disability Action Plan—a key tool for identifying challenges and implementing change to improve accessibility for audience members and staff.

Case studies for this programme aimed to harness our delegates' enthusiasm for accessibility and guide them in creating bespoke plans for their venues. These included experts from the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Scottish Queer International Film Festival, Midland Arts Centre (MAC), and Birmingham Hippodrome.

100%

PARTICIPANTS WHO LEARNED SOMETHING NEW OF VALUE TO THEIR ORGANISATION

“
I valued the relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Charlie is a brilliant facilitator!”

TALENT

WE DEVELOP TALENT, AIMING TO GIVE EVERYONE CLEAR & ACCESSIBLE ROUTES INTO THE FILM INDUSTRY

We hope to help create a sector that is highly-skilled, truly equitable, accessible and that reflects the diversity of the communities we collectively serve. We help talent start in the industry as well as providing tailored professional development opportunities as their careers progress.

Our work in developing talent encompasses ICO training opportunities in film exhibition; and our work with BFI NETWORK in the South East, supporting and developing emerging filmmaking talent; the Young Film Network South East that, with BFI Film Academy support, aims to inspire a new generation of young people to deepen their involvement in film.

SUPPORTING FILM EXHIBITION TALENT TRAINING INITIATIVES

We support talent development across the film exhibition sector through a range of bespoke training initiatives. These include our flagship Cultural Cinema Exhibition programme for emerging film programmers, a broad selection of online courses, and our growing peer-to-peer International Film Festival Network.

COUNTRIES

25

ORGANISATIONS

344

TRAINEES

397

CULTURAL CINEMA EXHIBITION

We ran the 12th edition of our flagship training course, Cultural Cinema Exhibition (CCE) 2025, in January. We call CCE our ‘flagship’ because it strikes at the heart of our mission to champion the broadest range of cinema and develop audiences, venues, and talent.

The course equips participants to create pioneering, globally-minded film programmes, develop inspiring and inclusive venues, and encourage everyone in their communities to engage with thought-provoking cinema.

Always oversubscribed, it is recognised as a key entry point into the sector for talent by industry leaders, marking participants out as someone with the knowledge and commitment to make a real contribution to the exhibition sector.

This edition was one of our best yet, with 18 motivated participants benefitting from an unrivalled range of industry leaders from organisations including BFI, Barbican, Curzon, Sony, Letterboxd, Altitude, Film London, and many more. Participants gained a detailed understanding of the dynamic state of the industry and were shown pathways to realising their talent and ambition in cinema programming.

An exciting moment in the course is always seeing participants applying their learning in group

programming project ideas. The great ideas this year included Brave Girls, a repertory season critiquing one of Hollywood’s biggest backhanded compliments; Take Two, a monthly strand to build audiences for films beyond the mainstream; Reel Time, a repertory season focused on the concept of time, inspired by Christian Marclay’s *The Clock*; and In Context, a monthly strand to contextualise contemporary releases within cinema history.

In the course’s 20-year history, alumni have gone on to achieve top jobs at the BFI, Picturehouse, Curzon Cinemas, Watershed, Sheffield DocFest, Altitude, the Barbican, and film festivals around the world and we’re sure that we’ll be hearing a lot about this year’s cohort in the years to come.



“
My experience as part of Cultural Cinema Exhibition 2025 cohort was enriching, educational and inspiring.”



ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORM

The ICO online learning platform is a well-established hub for low-cost professional development opportunities in film exhibition that people can access anywhere in the world and complete their learning in their own time and at their own pace.

The platform covers a wide range of film exhibition courses, including Practical Programming, Data-Driven Marketing, REACH Strategic Audience Development, Environmental Sustainability, Front of House Workers and the newly-updated Developing Your Film Festival Online.

286 new students enrolled in one of our courses this year, taking our overall enrolments on the platform to more than 2,800. Practical Programming and the Front of House Workers Online Course remain our two most popular courses, accounting for 30% of new enrolments.

“
An outstanding training programme that covered a multitude of subjects that will greatly inform me in my decision making and future career in the film exhibition and programming industry.

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL NETWORK

Throughout the past year, the ICO has maintained its support for the global film festival sector, primarily through the efforts of the International Film Festival Network (IFFN).

A membership-based community which fosters collaboration, sharing of best practice and innovation, and a commitment to developing equitable and robust organisations. Now, in the second year of this pilot phase, the IFFN has grown to include 21 members from 15 countries, with a combined annual attendance of over 400,000 film fans worldwide.

As part of this initiative, we launched the Financial Health of Global Film Festivals survey to gather data on the current state of the sector, receiving responses from 49 festivals from Australia to Tunisia. The findings indicated that 85% of respondents require increased public funding to stay operational, 69% cited rising costs as their greatest challenge, and 37% predicted they could sustain activity for a year or less under current conditions. These insights directly shaped the focus and structure of this year’s International Film Festival Network activity.

Throughout the year, we hosted quarterly online discussion sessions with industry leaders, exploring key issues facing film festivals. Topics included threats to programming independence with Tiina Lokk (Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival); handling talent with Allison Gardner (Glasgow Film Festival); working with sales agents with Vicki Brown (BFI); ticketing systems with Jakub Królikowski (BNP Paribas New Horizons International Film Festival); and staff wellbeing with Michelle White (6ft From the Spotlight).

85%

OF RESPONDENTS SAID
THEY REQUIRED INCREASED
PUBLIC FUNDING IN ORDER
TO STAY OPERATIONAL



“
*A great opportunity to meet
professionals from different
festivals and get an update on
the challenges and successes*

The central event of the IFFN calendar was the International Festival Summit, held in July 2024 at the BNP Paribas New Horizons International Film Festival in Wroclaw, Poland with representatives from 13 festivals. A key focus of the summit was crisis management, with attendees exchanging insights and exploring how others had navigated similar challenges.

In response to priorities raised by member festivals at the International Festival Summit, we established the IFFN Collaboration Fund, supported by the British Council. This fund enables members to travel to festivals in 47 Official Development Assistance countries or to bring in talent from those countries, continuing to foster festival exchange and encouraging members to create new partnerships across continents. So far, this fund has been used to support two member festivals working with professionals in several countries, including Brazil, China, and Morocco.

The International Film Festival Network continues to grow and evolve its offering in collaboration with its members. We will return to Poland in July 2025 for the next International Festival Summit.

IFFN MEMBER COUNTRIES



SUPPORTING NEW & EMERGING TALENT

BFI NETWORK SOUTH EAST

BFI NETWORK exists to support, develop, and fund emerging filmmakers early in their careers. Our role is to deliver that support in the South East of England.

Our BFI NETWORK Talent Executives assess and recommend projects for BFI funding through the Short Film Fund and Early Development Fund. As the selected Short Film Fund projects are developed and go into production, our team provides creative oversight on projects and works closely with funded teams during all stages of production.

In addition, we also deliver local professional development and networking support for writers, directors, and producers. This year, we supported 1,280 individuals across 17 locations in the South East to develop their filmmaking ambitions. These events included labs, mixers and workshops. We are proud that 45% of attendees identified as Black and Global Majority, 60% as women, and 37% from working-class backgrounds.

We hosted three Writers' Labs in Margate, Oxford, and Norwich to support talented writers with ambitions to develop a feature film treatment or a short film script. From 142 applications, we were able to support 45 participants, of whom 100% said they would recommend the lab. To reduce access barriers, 17% received travel bursaries.



“
*Lovely sense of community, very
safe space to discuss not only
your script and ideas but also any
questions about common practices.*



Our longer-form script development programme, Outline, supported ten writers of Black and Asian descent in developing their short scripts, with Cassandra Johnson-Bekoe providing feedback and mentoring. Outline is one of ICO's equality, diversity, and inclusion commitments, with an annual focus on underrepresented groups to redress underrepresentation within film production.

“
I’ve come away feeling very inspired to carry on writing for the screen. I can’t thank you all enough for everything I’ve learned.”

We continued to invest in the next generation of producers through our Future Producers Weekender, co-designed and delivered by Abiola Rufai-Awojide and Elizabeth Rufai. Ten early-career producers took part in this intensive two-day event in November. We particularly encouraged applications from producers who identify as working-class, as the unpaid early career stages of producing often exclude those without personal wealth, limiting who gets to shape the stories we watch on screen.

Over the two days, producers gained practical skills in budgeting, scheduling, contracting, and financing short films and creative insights into script development and collaboration. One participant reflected, “I’ve had imposter syndrome for years, but this weekend helped me see a path forward. I now feel confident to pursue producing as a career.” All participants completed the programme having achieved their personal development goals, and 100% said they would recommend it to others.

Many of the producers collaborated with writers from our Outline script development programme, with connections cemented at our Connect & Collab event in February. This matchmaking initiative paired writers and producers for guided creative exercises, helping kickstart potential collaborations and peer-to-peer support.

In addition to our professional development programmes, we also held events in partnership with Cambridge Film Festival, Margate Film Festival, Essex Film Festival, Film Oxford, the National Centre for Writing, Farnham Maltings and Turner Contemporary. A big thank you to all our partners who support us in delivering events and programmes throughout the region.

IMPACT & SUCCESS

BFI NETWORK

In 2024–25, we saw the growing impact and success of our outreach and development programmes, highlighted by the achievements of several remarkable talents.

One standout moment was *Daddy Daze* by Phil Ossai receiving BFI NETWORK Short Film Funding. Phil participated in our Short Film Development Programme 2023 with *Daddy Daze* and further honed his skills through our Directing Actors Lab in early 2024.

We also celebrated Courteney Tan securing Stage 2 funding through the Early Development Fund for their project, *Blue*. Courteney first took part in our Short Film Development Programme in 2022 and went on to write and direct their debut short, *Longing*, in 2023 with our support. The new funding has enabled Courteney to develop *Blue* from a treatment into a full feature script.

Beyond *Daddy Daze*, we supported six additional short films and five BFI Early Development Fund projects this year. Notably, three were from writers we had previously supported through the BFI Short Film Fund. We're proud to see such a strong pipeline of talent progressing from our development programmes to wider funding opportunities, and we remain committed to supporting talent as they transition into feature filmmaking.

From our slate of completed shorts, four films—*Pylon*, *Mother of Mine*, *O, GLORY!*, and *The Licensed Fool*—premiered online on the Directors Notes platform. Meanwhile, *Essex Girls* was selected for 49 festivals by the end of 2024, earning five awards, including Best Film



and Best Director. Richard Fenwick’s *Soulmate* achieved similar acclaim, winning nine awards such as Best Short, Best Director, and Best VFX, and was selected for 51 festivals.

Several writers and directors we have supported through BFI NETWORK also saw significant career milestones this year. Jessi Gutch, who developed *My Cells Are Trying to Kill Me*, partnered with producer Loran Dunn (*Hoard*), and the project is now in development with the main BFI Development Fund. Jess Dadds (*I Am Good at Karate*) and Jesse Lewis-Reece (*Mother of Mine*) both secured agent representation with Casarotto and United Agents respectively. Nicholas Finegan’s latest film, *Some Kind of Paradise*, was also nominated for the prestigious Iris Prize.

▲
**BEHIND THE SCENES OF
DADDY DAZE, A FUNNY
AND HEARTFELT SHORT
DIRECTED BY PHIL OSSAI
EXPLORING FATHERHOOD,
MASCULINITY AND THE
GENERATIONAL DIVIDE
BETWEEN FATHER & SON.**

SUPPORTING INCLUSIVITY

CASE STUDY: GREEN GRASS

One project we were keen for BFI NETWORK to support this year was *Green Grass*, a coming-of-age story about a university student who learns to accept his deafness with the help of a fellow Deaf student.

From the outset of the production, director Aram Atkinson and producer Makenna Guyler were determined to have an inclusive film set. They aimed to recruit a cast and crew that were 50% d/Deaf. Following lots of outreach, they were able to secure one-third d/Deaf cast and crew, which is a huge achievement.

At each stage, they put practices in place to ensure authenticity, real representation, and inclusiveness in the filmmaking process. They spoke to d/Deaf consultants during the script and edit stage to ensure the inclusiveness of *Green Grass* on-set was the same as on screen. Director, Aram, who is hearing, learned BSL to be able to sign with d/Deaf cast and crew on set. The team ensured hearing crew members could use an app to learn basic BSL. They ensured there were enough interpreters on set so that every d/Deaf person had access to an interpreter and adjusted their camera angles to ensure that d/Deaf actors had an interpreter in sight while rolling.



33%

OF THE CAST & CREW ARE d/DEAF

“

*From the very first draft of *Green Grass*, we committed ourselves to only making this project if we could make it accessibly and collaboratively with the d/Deaf community. There is simply no way this could have been achieved without BFI NETWORK South East, who truly stepped up at each and every stage of the process to support us and protect opportunities for grassroots filmmakers and d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing creatives*

We have learned so much in this process about the challenges, costs, and rewarding benefits of providing accessibility on set. BFI NETWORK’s continued support in championing our work allows us to further spread those learnings to wider audiences.

ARAM ATKINSON

SUPPORTING FUTURE TALENT

YOUNG FILM NETWORK SOUTH EAST

Our aim in Young Film Network South East is to increase access to and appreciation of cultural cinema among 16-25 year-olds and for them to learn more about the film industry.

636

ATTENDEES ACROSS 18 YOUNG FILM NETWORK SOUTH EAST
AND BFI FILM ACADEMY RECOMMENDS SCREENINGS



TOTAL ATTENDEES AT YFNSE EVENTS

302

183

ATTENDEES ACROSS 9 SCENE
& BUSINESS OF FILM EVENTS

+

119

ATTENDEES FOR OUR
BFI FILM ACADEMY LAB

EVENTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SOUTH EAST

This year, backed by support from BFI Film Academy, we hosted 10 events covering a range of topics including TV writing, film careers, directing, film criticism, using archive film and script writing for neurodivergent writers.

We delivered events in Norwich, Hastings, Brighton, Peterborough, Lowestoft, Reading, and online, as well as working with a young programmer group, Kino Collective in Lewes, to curate a special BFI Future Film Festival screening at Depot Cinema, celebrating local emerging talent. Over 300 young people participated in our programme, and 630 came to our screenings and events.

We also supported independent venues across the South East to run screenings under the BFI Film Academy Recommends banner. Some of these screenings were of new releases, and some involved young people in the delivery and marketing; for instance, Trestle Theatre in St. Albans had their Youth Board select BFI NETWORK shorts and invite one of the filmmakers along afterwards for a Q&A.



“

It gave the Youth Board experience in planning a creative event and gave them responsibilities to help with delivery. They came up with some valuable ideas and a good array of questions to put forward to BFI NETWORK filmmaker Mishaal Memon. They took responsibility for announcing films and delivering the Q&A, as well as announcing and collecting data using a QR code and SurveyMonkey.

TRESTLE THEATRE



SHADOW A FILMMAKER

Four young people took part in our Shadow a Filmmaker scheme, being placed on BFI NETWORK-backed short films: *Green Grass* and *Charity*. The set of *Green Grass* was particularly inclusive to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing creatives, so we supported the ethos and benefited from it by recruiting two D/deaf or hard-of-hearing shadowing participants.

“*Everyone was so welcoming and inclusive, and I enjoyed every second. This experience was so beneficial, and I would recommend anything like this to anyone who wants to go into this field.*”

SHORT CUT FILM FUND

For the second year, our Short Cut Film Fund supported three young filmmakers, each with a budget of £1,000, to produce a five-minute short film. The programme provided support throughout the process, including mentorship from established BFI NETWORK filmmakers, script development advice, editing guidance, peer-to-peer meetups with the other awardees, group sessions and a one-to-one meeting with a BFI NETWORK Talent Executive.

All three films received a dedicated screening event at the FHSE Members Forum in March 2025 at BFI Southbank, garnering a warm reception from an audience of 40 regional film exhibitors; this exposure led to further screening opportunities and free festival submissions for the filmmakers including to Sunrise Film Festival (where all three of the films were also screened at the inaugural Sunrise Industry Summit ahead of our BFI Film Academy- supported panel discussion), Suffolk Shorts and by Through A Different Lens in Reading.

TO STAY UP TO DATE WITH OUR WORK WITH YOUNG FILM TALENT, VISIT [YOUNGFILMNETWORKSOUTHEAST.ORG.UK](https://youngfilmmetworksoutheast.org.uk)

SUPPORTED PROJECTS 2024-25



4.18
DIR. BRIONI FARREN



TOP & TAIL
DIR. CIARA HONEY



6.03
DIR. CHRIS JAE BROWN



ADVOCACY

THROUGH OUR ADVOCACY, WE WANT THE INDEPENDENT CINEMA SECTOR TO HAVE A LOUDER VOICE.

This year we expanded our advocacy work on behalf of our sector to inform policy change and push for increased funding for access to cultural cinema across the UK.

We have worked to identify the sector's most pressing needs and communicate them directly to funders and policymakers, who are increasingly engaging with and acting on our recommendations. The sector faces urgent challenges and some of the data we've collected paints a concerning picture. Yet, we're more motivated than ever to support the importance of independent cinema in people's creative lives and in communities across the country.

ADVOCATING FOR SUPPORT & GROWTH

A CHALLENGING LANDSCAPE

We know that independent cinemas are struggling as a number of profound difficulties have hit the sector in quick succession.

Our survey in 2023-24 had shown us how significantly cinemas were still struggling to recover in the post-pandemic environment, and we were able to use this as solid data when we gave evidence to the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

60%

OF INDEPENDENT CINEMAS SURVEYED
ARE NOT MEETING THEIR INCOME TARGETS

This year, we were keen to get an updated picture to see if the situation had changed, Our Support and Growth for Independent Cinemas Survey, conducted in November 2024, showed that almost half (48%) of respondents were forecasting a financial loss in 2024-25, while 60% were not meeting their income targets. When asked what measures of support would be most helpful, respondents highlighted several key areas including operational funding for cinemas, a reduction in VAT, and urgent capital investment. With the formation of a new government at Westminster, the parliamentary inquiry on British Film and High-End Television reconvened, and we were able to submit this new evidence to it. It also informed our submission to the Department for Business & Trade's consultation on the green paper for the UK's modern industrial strategy.

46%

OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY NEEDED
SUPPORT TO REMAIN OPERATIONAL

48%

RESPONDENTS PROJECTED A LOSS

61%

OF RESPONDENTS SAID CAPITAL FUNDING
IS NEEDED FOR ORGANISATIONAL GROWTH



AN URGENT NEED FOR CAPITAL INVESTMENT

Many cinemas depleted their reserves during and after the pandemic to keep their doors open. While audience trends over the past two years have been encouraging, the sector continues to face significant challenges in managing the upkeep, repairs and necessary renovations to often historic or outdated buildings and keeping pace with evolving cinema technology and rising audience expectations

In March 2025, we conducted a sector-wide survey to better understand the scale and impact of capital investment needs of venues and how this was impacting their ability to stay viable. The findings were sobering to those who love independent cinemas, with nearly one in three respondents saying they were unlikely to survive without access to capital funding within the next 3 to 5 years. Only 40% felt confident they could remain open over the same period.

The most urgent priorities identified included upgrading projectors and cinema technology, investing in environmental sustainability and energy efficiency, addressing critical building repairs (such as roofs and windows) and investment in growing the business to support long-term resilience.

It's a difficult time to be making the case for new financial support, but there hasn't been a dedicated capital investment fund for independent cinemas in over two decades, so we must make the case as forcefully and urgently as we can. We worked to raise the profile of the issue nationally, securing national press coverage and collaborating with the BFI to feed this evidence directly to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and through them to the Treasury.

31%

RESPONDENTS WHO DID NOT BELIEVE THEY COULD
REMAIN OPERATIONAL WITHOUT CAPITAL FUNDING

WELCOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FILM EXHIBITION FROM WESTMINSTER

The Parliamentary Report into British Film and High-End Television from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee was released in April 2025, the first such inquiry since 2015. The evidence from the ICO and our colleagues in the sector had clearly been heard and, for what felt like the first time, the specific needs of independent cinemas and distribution were recognised.



The committee recognised that independent cinemas, often operating as charities with specific cultural aims and/or receiving public funding for specific areas of activity, have a fundamentally different business model to commercial multiplexes.

We support their recommendation to introduce core funding for independent cinemas, similar to Arts Council England's National Portfolio model. This would be a transformational shift enabling long-term planning and innovation. Likewise the recommendation to establish a dedicated capital funding pot to help cinemas upgrade their infrastructure and improve energy efficiency. This couldn't have come at a more important time as, just a few days later, our survey report was released outlining how critical such funding is for independent cinemas in order to stay viable and grow.

We support the recommendation for the Government to review the impact of a permanent VAT reduction on cultural events, including cinema tickets, as a means to support the growth of the creative industries. The report highlights that the temporary 5% VAT rate during the pandemic provided clear benefits to both cinemas and audiences, and notes that the UK remains an outlier in Europe in not applying a reduced rate to cinema and other cultural venues.



THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A REPRESENTATIVE & SKILLED WORKFORCE IN A SAFE, INCLUSIVE SECTOR.

A healthy cultural sector gives voice to and speaks to everyone, regardless of race, gender, disability or socio-economic background.

The committee notes that the workforce remains unrepresentative and that this issue is particularly acute at the senior level. They acknowledge that people from underrepresented groups often struggle to find initial routes into the industry.

Practically speaking, more support is needed for traineeship schemes in our sector. Having run a scheme focused on Black, Asian and ethnically diverse talent for a decade, we can now see the impact as former trainees move into senior roles in the industry and make an impact with audiences. But if we want to continue to nurture talent, we must have consistency of support for opportunities to embed them in the industry.

The committee noted that the entire film industry has a problem with bullying and harassment and that this causes serious harm to individuals and the industry's ability to retain a skilled and representative workforce. We agree that an independent body in the form of the new Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority is vital to help secure lasting change.

The ICO are proud supporters of CIISA and working with it to encourage the independent film exhibition industry to support it and adopt its four standards of safe working environments, inclusive working environments, open and accessible reporting mechanisms, and a responsive learning culture.

EQUITY DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IS AT THE HEART OF OUR WORK WITH AUDIENCES, VENUES, TALENT AND THE WAY WE ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE.

The ICO was established in 2003 to ensure that the widest range of stories could reach the widest possible range of audiences.

Our work seeks to diversify the sector and the audiences the exhibition workforce serves, ensuring everyone is welcome. We are also continuously looking at how to foster positive change within the ICO and share the privilege and power we hold.

ED&I ACTION PLAN

In 2021, we created an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) action plan to increase ambition and drive meaningful change across ICO activities, the ICO as an organisation and the wider sector.

ED&I principles are integrated into all levels of our operations, from recruitment and HR policies to staff appraisals. We want to ensure every staff member feels part of the development of this work and responsible for their assigned actions.

Our ED&I plan is a living document which continues to evolve with the ICO, the wider sector and the world at large, with progress updates published on our website every six months, ensuring transparency and accountability. We are now working to the second iteration of our ED&I plan for the period 2024-26. Our ED&I Working Group has continued to meet every three months to move this work forward and track its progress.

As commitments within the plan are met, our aim is to ensure these actions become embedded in our ongoing practice. The next section summarises new initiatives or where there have been specific updates against our existing commitments.



**SHÉ (SNAKE), DIRECTED BY RENEE ZHAN, FROM
‘INTRODUCING...’ OUR SPACE FOR DISCOVERY
AND COLLABORATION AT SCREENING DAYS**

ED&I STAFF & BOARD DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Each year, we anonymously survey our staff and trustees and publish the results on our website as part of our commitment to increasing diversity across the ICO and our Board. Our ambition is to better reflect the ethnic diversity of the London region and the proportion of people who identify as disabled, in line with data from the 2021 UK Census.

NEW ICO BOARD MEMBERS

Six new board members have joined the ICO this year, increasing representation on our Board and bringing valuable experience and skills to the organisation.



DR ROWAN AUST
ACADEMIC & CONSULTANT



DR HIU MAN CHAN
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ODYSSEY
& SENIOR LECTURER



ANTHONY LEE
MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS
SPECIALIST



RICHARD MCDONALD
CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT
& NOT-FOR-PROFIT CONSULTANT



DR SITA THOMAS
MOVEMENT DIRECTOR, INTIMACY
COORDINATOR & LECTURE



YI WANG
FOUNDER & DIRECTOR
OF QUEER EAST

READ ABOUT ALL TRUSTEES AT [INDEPENDENTCINEMAOFFICE.ORG.UK/ABOUT-US/OUR-TRUSTEES](https://independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/about-us/our-trustees)

ED&I STAFF SATISFACTION SURVEY

In June 2024, we conducted an anonymous staff satisfaction survey, which was analysed and shared at both a staff and Board meeting.

The results were very positive with no staff members reporting experiencing discrimination or bias in the workplace:



100% RATED THEIR JOB SATISFACTION AS 'GOOD' OR BETTER



100% SAID THEY WOULD RECOMMEND THE ICO AS A PLACE TO WORK



93% FELT THEY HAD A HEALTHY WORK/LIFE BALANCE



87% REPORTED FEELING SUPPORTED BY BOTH THEIR COLLEAGUES AND LINE MANAGER

While the results point to a positive work culture, the survey also highlighted areas for improvement. In response, the following priority areas have been identified for development:

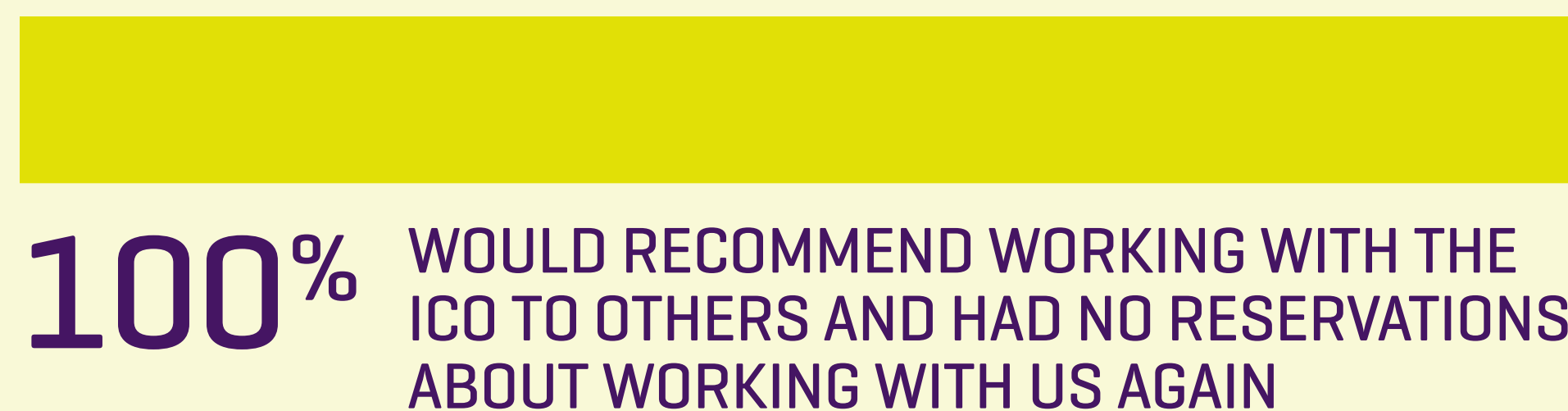
- Enhancing career support and access to professional development
- Increasing the visibility and accessibility of our independent HR advisor
- Improving the distribution and transparency of Senior Management Team meeting agendas
- Reviewing our recruitment process, including exploring the potential for positive action
- Using staff meetings more effectively to engage with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion topics



PAMILYA, DIRECTED BY MILES BLACKET, FROM 'INTRODUCING...' OUR SPACE FOR DISCOVERY AND COLLABORATION AT SCREENING DAYS



WORKING WITH THE ICO



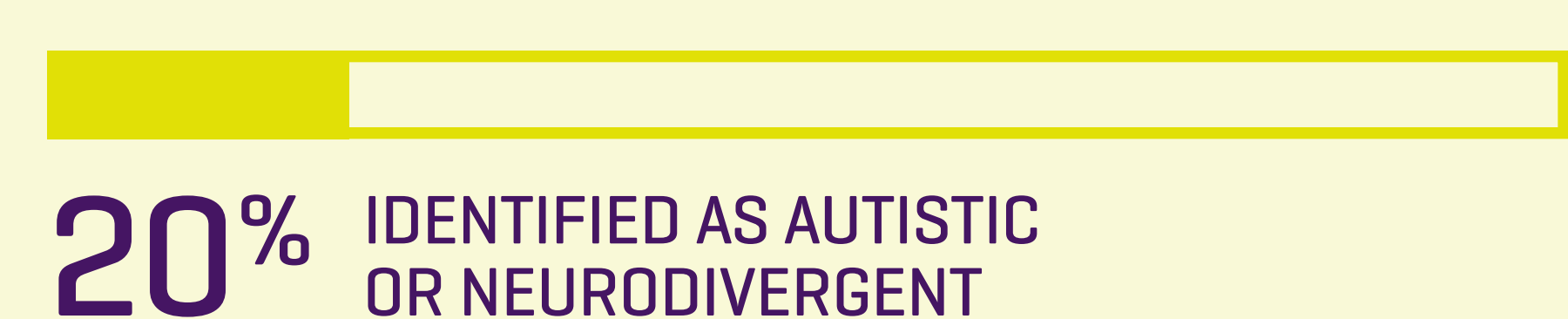
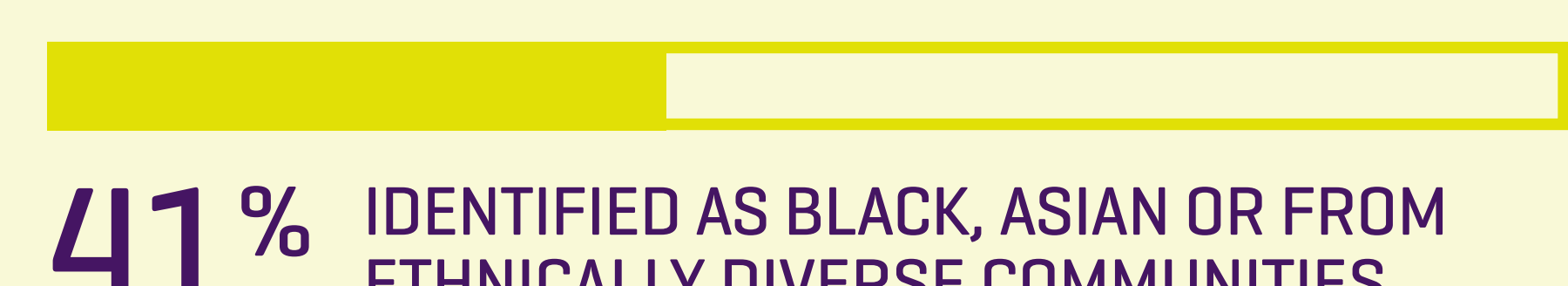
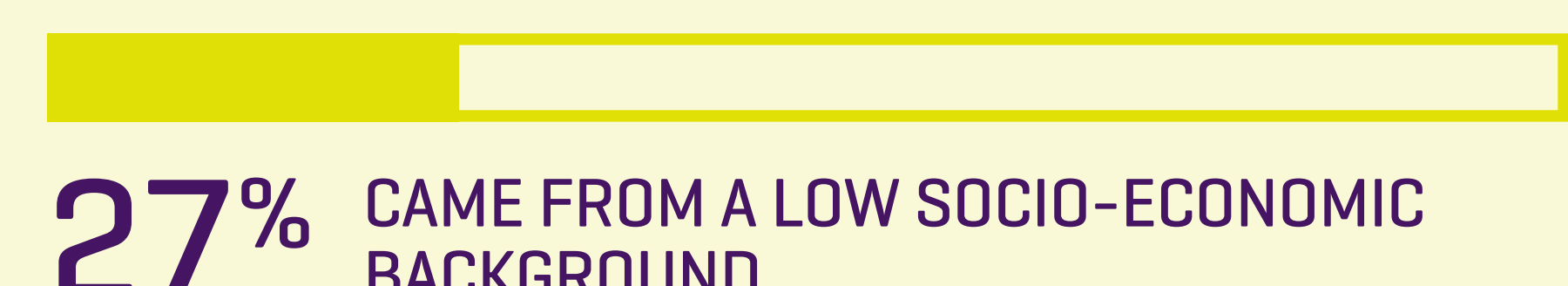
ED&I FREELANCER FEEDBACK FORM

We've committed to working with a broader range of people when engaging speakers, writers, designers and other freelancers to more equitably share paid opportunities and improve working experiences.

In 2023, we began gathering anonymous feedback with a short form sent to freelancers once their projects were completed. This form allows us to keep a more accurate picture of who we commission, as well as helping us improve the experience for our collaborators going forward.

We recently reached 50 responses to our freelancer feedback survey providing us with a reasonable sample to analyse and see if there are improvements we can take forward. Initial findings about freelancers' experiences of working with us are encouraging and the demographic data collected gives us valuable insights into the diversity of freelancers we have worked with.

FREELANCER DEMOGRAPHICS



ED&I: IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY

We want our sector to be as accessible as possible, whether you’re watching films or engaging professionally. Progress this year included new ways of helping our client cinemas find accessibility materials for the films they show and our new internal style guide.

ACCESS MATERIALS TRACKER

We now have an access materials tracker which we use to inform all ICO-programmed sites on the availability of audio description and descriptive subtitles on new release films. This will allow them to plan and programme more accessible screenings and do so much further in advance, supporting a more strategic approach to inclusive and accessible audience development.

ICO STYLE GUIDE

We updated our internal style guide to improve consistency, clarity and accessibility in our written communications. The guide also explains our organisational approach to inclusive language.



22

FILMS HAD NEW DESCRIPTIVE SUBTITLES
CREATED BY ICO AS PART OF SCREENING DAYS



ED&I: FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

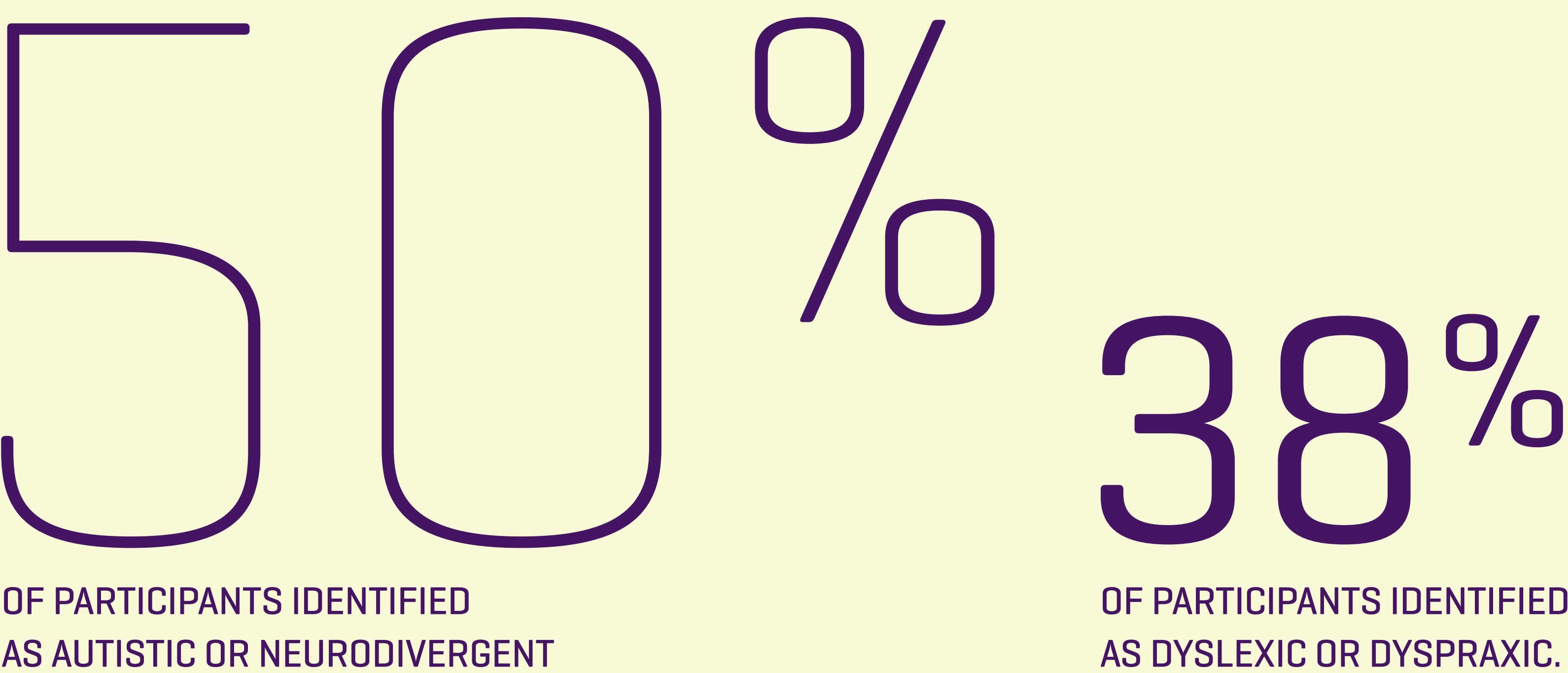
We proactively organised meetings with diverse-led organisations in the South East to promote FHSE funding opportunities and encourage applications from a broader range of people and organisations

We hosted a webinar on the Film Exhibition Fund to clearly explain its objectives and how people can apply for support. To ensure wider access, a recording of the webinar was uploaded to the ICO website for anyone unable to attend live. Recognising that people absorb information in different ways, we are committed to communicating the Fund's aims through multiple formats to support broader understanding and increase accessibility to funding.

ED&I: YOUNG FILM NETWORK SOUTH EAST

We delivered an event for neurodivergent and learning-disabled writers in collaboration with Oska Bright Film Festival and Fabrica in Brighton.

The event explored a specialised template within the scriptwriting software, Final Draft, that was developed by arts inclusion charity TAPE Community Music and Film with the backing of BFI NETWORK. Several of the films screened at the event had been created using this tool.



ED&I: BFI NETWORK

In order to make sure the BFI NETWORK Short Film Fund is reaching as wide and diverse a group of talent as possible, we hosted six webinars to disseminate information on funding and programme opportunities, with a total of 279 participants. A version of this Short Film Fund webinar exists online for prospective applicants to revisit.



IN NOVEMBER 2024, WE DELIVERED A TWO-DAY FUTURE PRODUCERS WEEKENDER TO ADDRESS UNDERREPRESENTATION WITHIN THE INDUSTRY

72%

OF FINAL COHORT SELECTED IDENTIFIED AS BEING FROM A WORKING-CLASS BACKGROUND

Outline is our programme to develop writing talent in the South East, with a focus on those who are underrepresented in the film industry.

This year, we supported writers or writer-directors, 100% of whom identified as Black and Asian descent, to develop a short film script. They also received tailored mentoring support and a space to connect as a cohort and build industry relationships. In selecting which group to support, we look at who is underrepresented in both our applications and our selected projects. In the next edition, we will be focusing on women and non-binary writers or writer-directors.



FESTIVAL OF SLAPS, DIRECTED BY ABDOU CISSÉ, FROM ‘INTRODUCING...’ OUR SPACE FOR DISCOVERY AND COLLABORATION AT SCREENING DAYS



▲
**AUTISM PLAYS ITSELF, DIRECTED BY
JANET HARBORD, FROM 'INTRODUCING...'
OUR SPACE FOR DISCOVERY AND
COLLABORATION AT SCREENING DAYS**

NEXT STEPS

The Board has approved the creation of designated funds to support the development of an organisation-wide Disability Action Plan and an impact study of our pioneering Film Exhibition, Distribution & Sales (FEDS) trainee scheme. When complete, the report will be launched at a 2025-26 event in celebration of FEDS alumni, their achievements and the broader industry impacts of the scheme to date.

With the help of audience consultancy Indigo, we are preparing a comprehensive review of demographics at Screening Days in 2025/26 to help us thoroughly understand who comes to the events, so we have a baseline picture to discover where our audience deviates from census and industry demographics. We will then create a strategic audience development plan based on the information we gather.

MILES KETLEY MEMORIAL FUND

Launched in 2022 in memory of our former trustee, the lawyer, producer, and media executive Miles Ketley, the fund is designed to support early career filmmakers who have already made their first short or feature and are now looking to develop their filmmaking practice.

The fund will continue for three more years from 2025-2027 after the Board approved its continuation with an increased budget of £7000 a year.

In line with Miles’ own interests, we are especially keen to support those whose voices are often overlooked in the industry. Filmmakers must be British and have shown work at a previous ICO Screening Days, either as a first feature or within our Spring or Autumn events’ Introducing slot.

The fund's criteria are relaxed. Filmmakers can apply for anything that will directly support their ongoing practice. Eligible directors and producers are contacted directly to alert them to the opportunity and invite them to apply.

We have continued to receive high demand for support from eligible filmmakers, underlining how important funding continues to be for filmmakers at this level. After panel review, this year’s selected

recipients were Abraham Adeyemi, Alice Russell, Alix Eve, Arwa Aburawa, Edem Kelman, Georgia Bradburn, Gianni Esporas, Marley Morrison, May Ziade, Raheela Suleman, Robin Elliott-Knowles, Theo Panagopoulos and Tolu Stedford.

The awards covered a range of different support, with many filmmakers receiving grants for filmmaking equipment and software, as well as other grants, including courses, contributions to filmmaking projects, and travel to festivals.

We’re excited to see how these filmmakers progress and develop their careers in the coming years, and we’re thrilled that we’re going to be able to continue offering this support to early career filmmakers for at least three more years.

MILES KETLEY FUND AWARDEES 2024-25



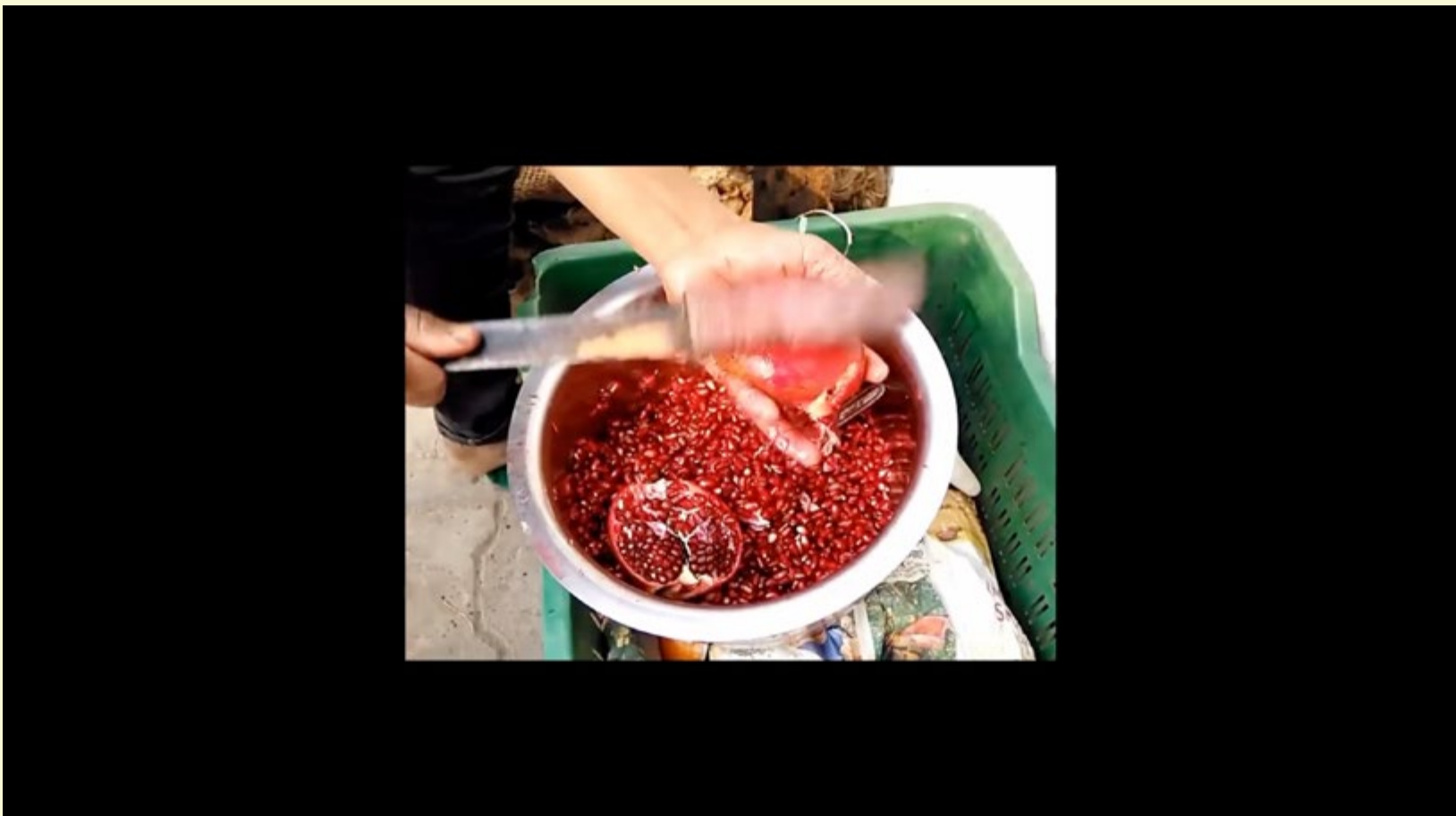
MAY ZIADÉ
NEO NAHDA



THEO PANAGOPOULOS
THE KEY



TOLU STEDFORD
THE MEDALLION



RAHEELA SULEMAN
THE VARIABLE

ABOUT

THE ICO

THE ICO WAS FOUNDED TO GIVE EVERYONE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE LIFE-CHANGING CINEMA ON THE BIG SCREEN.

Founded in 2003 as a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee, the ICO is based in London but works nationally with the goal of helping create an open, thriving and challenging film culture everywhere in the UK.

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. Launched with three members of staff and £120,000, the ICO now employs 20 members of staff and has an annual turnover of £1.7 million. Our work wouldn't be possible without the support of our partners, including funders, distributors, cultural organisations, our clients, and most notably cinemas.

TEAM ICO



As part of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan, the ICO has committed to collecting and publishing demographic data on its staff and trustees to show whether we are making progress on becoming an organisation that truly reflects the diversity of UK society

THE LATEST FIGURES, COLLECTED IN APRIL 2025, ARE AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE [INDEPENDENTCINEMAOFFICE.ORG.UK](https://independentcinemaoffice.org.uk)

CHAMPIONING INDEPENDENT CINEMA

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.

FUNDER



PARTNER



EVENT SPONSORS



Film Hub South East ↘

We are the lead organisation for Film Hub South East, one of eight national hubs in the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN) tasked with supporting audience development across the UK. We are the UK-wide lead for Training and Communications for the network.



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TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HOW WE
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