



INTRODUCTION

This year my leadership of the ICO board comes to a close. It's been a very rewarding 10 years working closely with the ICO's dedicated team. Amid new and ongoing challenges, they continue to work tremendously hard to find better solutions for cinemas and their staff – helping exhibitors across the UK to build sustainability, increase accessibility and find dynamic new ways to best serve their audiences and communities.

The ICO has grown not only in size but in ambition, with projects reaching far and wide and a stronger voice seeking greater support for the sector. I am very proud to have been a part of its interventions, especially those around helping our industry and workforce become more equitable. I know that the ICO will continue to innovate, support creative talent and champion cultural cinema for all.

I hope you enjoy reading about our work in 2025-26.



DOROTHY WILSON MBE, FRSA, D.Univ, FUW, D. Litt
CHAIR OF THE BOARD
INDEPENDENT CINEMA OFFICE

INTRODUCTION

The ICO's mission is to ensure that everyone across the UK can access the broadest range of cinema and everything we do is guided by our commitment to help cinemas show more diverse film, develop new audiences, and support their staff.

Over the past year, we have worked hard to strengthen our voice and position ourselves as the leading advocate for independent cinemas across the UK. The challenges facing the sector remain significant. Many venues continue to struggle to secure the capital investment needed to sustain and develop their businesses and reach broader audiences through ambitious and diverse programming. Alongside this, there are growing skills gaps in the workforce, which can only be addressed through strategic investment.

Via our UK Film Exhibition Workforce Survey, we have gathered vital data on what the sector workforce looks like today, a direct comparison four years on from our previous survey and the only data set of its kind. The results enable us to identify where the sector falls short in reflecting the UK population and where greater support is needed to help cinema workers develop skills and build long-term careers. Whilst there is a long way to go, we are encouraged by the passion shown by so many to drive the independent cinema industry forward.

We've worked with an array of wonderful organisations making invaluable contributions to their local communities; for example, through Spotlight in Peterborough, our targeted investment programme designed to address gaps in cultural film provision in the South East. We've met hundreds of venues and freelance workers at Spring, Autumn and specialised Screening Days events, which give exhibitors a crucial space to preview the best new British and international films, build capacity and connect with peers.

We were delighted to grow our client cinema network this year to 30, with venues covering the length and breadth of the UK from Mareel in the Shetlands to Barn in south Devon. To the network, we welcomed a new client cinema, the Market Pavilion, Blyth. Our remit as the lead organisation for Film Hub South East, part of the BFI Film Audience Network, has seen us deliver vital project funds to regional exhibitors through the Film Exhibition Fund alongside BFI NETWORK funds and a wide-ranging programme of training and networking events to filmmakers in the South East.

We continue to embed our commitment to equality, inclusion and diversity across all areas of our work, remaining responsive and open to learning as we evolve.

We're extremely grateful to the BFI, awarding National Lottery funding, for their continued support without whom none of this would be possible. We would also like to thank our sponsors, partners, clients, friends as well as the cinemas, festivals and community venues who bring our work to life through the audiences they welcome each day.



If you'd like to discuss anything featured in the report or explore a potential partnership, please do get in touch at: info@independentcinemaoffice.org.uk

CATHARINE DES FORGES
DIRECTOR
INDEPENDENT CINEMA OFFICE

We are the UK's support organisation for independent cinema.

OUR VISION IS FOR ALL COMMUNITIES TO HAVE ACCESS
TO A THRIVING INDEPENDENT CINEMA CULTURE
BY CHAMPIONING THE BROADEST RANGE OF CINEMA,
AND TO DEVELOP AUDIENCES, VENUES & PEOPLE.



ICO HIGHLIGHTS 2025-2026

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



• Through our programming work with Borderlines, the UK’s largest rural film festival, we supported **25 VENUES** to welcome over **20,000 CINEMAGOERS**



• We attracted **742 DELEGATES** from **333 ORGANISATIONS** to our Screening Days film preview events



• Our dedicated Audience Development Days, launched at Screening Days in 2023, has rapidly become a national forum for innovation and exploration in reaching and engaging audiences



• As the lead body for Film Hub South East, the BFI’s regional audience-development network, we supported **50 ORGANISATIONS** to deliver cultural cinema projects that reached **59,463 PEOPLE**



• We broadened the stories seen on UK screens, with the release of *Uncommon Voices: Exploring Class in New British Cinema*, championing today’s working-class filmmakers, and brought Todd Haynes’ *Safe* (1995) back to cinemas with renewed attention to its disability themes

— ICO CLIENT CINEMAS —

30



— TOTAL AUDIENCE WELCOMED —

1,195,308



ICO HIGHLIGHTS 2025-2026

WE WANT VENUES TO HAVE THE CONFIDENCE & SKILLSET TO CREATE DYNAMIC, SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATIONS.



- The ICO programming network supported multiple venues to grow 5-8% ahead of the market, and delivered a strong 15-20% market share on major international titles such as *Sirat* and *Holy Cow*



- In our role leading Film Hub South East, we invested £266,276 in 50 EXHIBITION ORGANISATIONS in the South East



- Through our enquiries service, we supported over 1,100 EXHIBITORS, providing guidance on licensing, film rights, routes into cinema careers and more



- We delivered the second edition of our Revisiting Your Cinema Business Model programme, strengthening cinemas' business skills and providing practical strategies to help them adapt to financial pressures, shifting audience behaviours and wider industry change



- The ICO blog continued its growth, a trusted resource helping venues strengthen their skills and confidence. Its practical advice and programming inspiration drew 20,267 VIEWS

OUR ICO CLIENT CINEMAS GENERATED

£8,836,990 AT THE UK BOX-OFFICE



ICO HIGHLIGHTS 2025-2026

WE WANT PEOPLE TO HAVE ACCESSIBLE PATHWAYS
& CAREER PROGRESSION TO CREATE NEW VISIONS & VOICES.



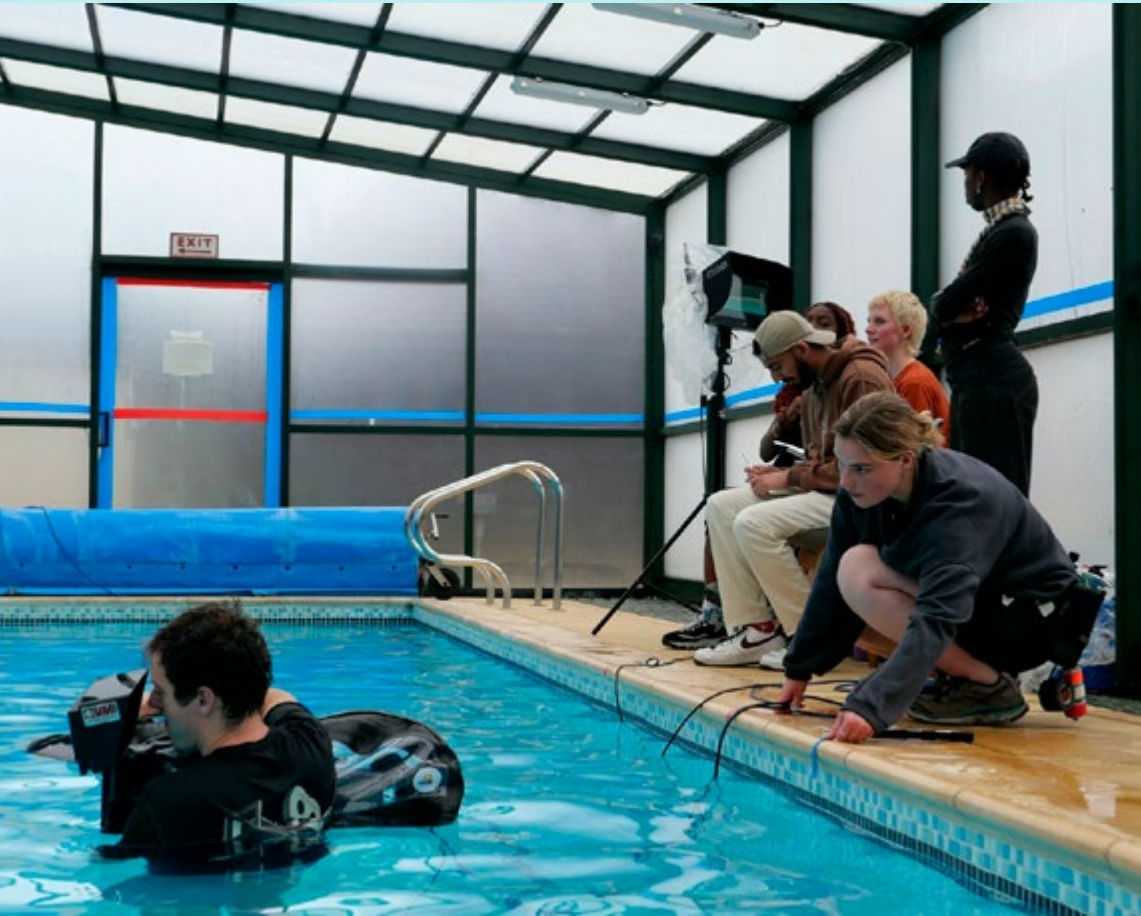
• Learners completed more than **4,500 LESSONS** on our Online Learning Platform



• Our jobs platform received over **216K VISITS**, circulating **360 ROLES** to **10K+ SUBSCRIBERS** and widening access to paid opportunities



• The International Film Festival Network brought festivals from around the world together to strengthen connections, share expertise and support each other's growth, representing a combined annual audience of **300,000 FILMGOERS**



• We supported **850 YOUNG PEOPLE** through our Young Film Network South East programmes, broadening access to screen industry knowledge and helping them take first steps towards film careers



• As the BFI's partner for developing new and emerging filmmakers in the South East, we supported **1,271 PEOPLE** across **17 LOCATIONS**, building skills, confidence and creative networks

— NUMBER OF PEOPLE ENGAGED IN ICO FILM EXHIBITION TRAINING PROGRAMMES —

439 PARTICIPANTS

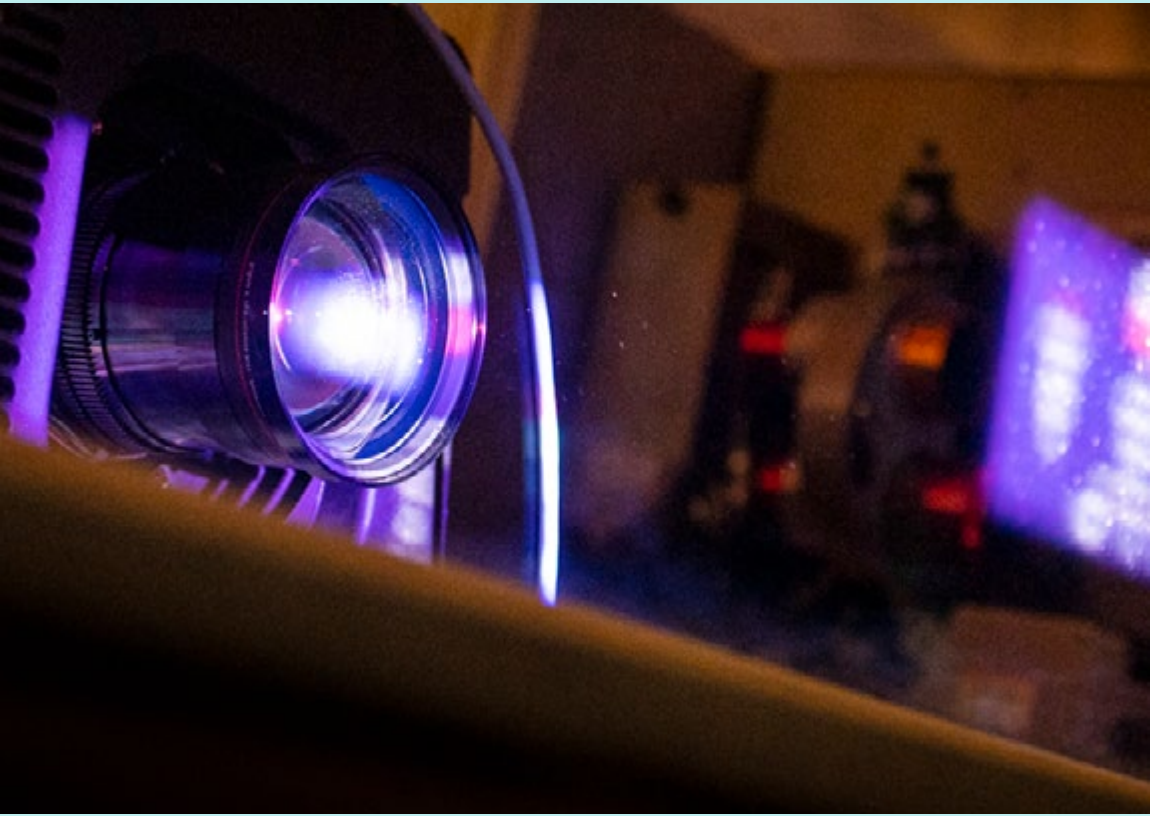
363 ORGANISATIONS

14 COUNTRIES



ICO HIGHLIGHTS 2025-2026

WE WANT THE INDEPENDENT CINEMA SECTOR TO HAVE A LOUDER VOICE.



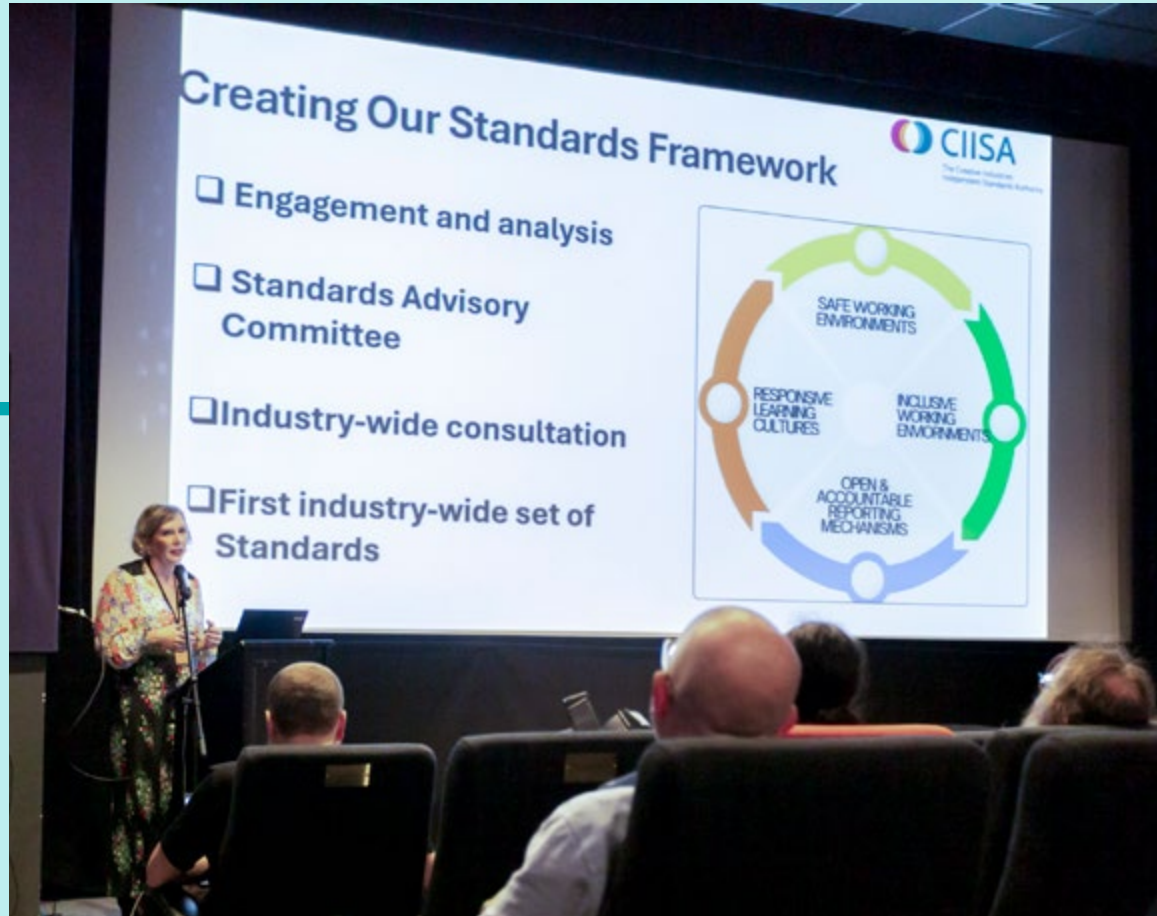
• We strengthened our national advocacy, contributing to DCMS ministerial roundtables, meeting MPs and policy advisors, and submitting evidence to the Secretary of State to champion increased investment in arts and culture



• Through our 2026 Exhibition Workforce Survey, we collected robust evidence on who makes up the cinema workforce and the realities of their pay, skills and working conditions. We are using this evidence in our advocacy work with policymakers and funders, to help direct investment to where it will most improve equity, working lives and long-term sector sustainability



• We presented sector evidence to the Northern Culture APPG Cultural Capital Untapped Inquiry, ensuring independent cinemas were recognised in regional and national cultural policy discussions



• We maintained strong industry representation through board work with CICAIE and continued membership of CIISA, amplifying the needs of independent cinemas across UK and international forums

RESULTS FROM OUR EXHIBITION WORKFORCE SURVEY

57% OF RESPONDENTS COME FROM HIGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS, COMPARED TO

37% OF THE GENERAL POPULATION



ICO HIGHLIGHTS 2025-2026

WE WANT OUR SECTOR TO BE MORE EQUITABLE, DIVERSE & INCLUSIVE.



- Seven new Board members joined the ICO, strengthening representation and bringing a wider range of experience, skills and perspectives to our governance



- We continued to deliver our ED&I Action Plan, which included: commissioning audience consultants Indigo to undertake a comprehensive review of who attends our Screening Days events, developing accessibility standards to be implemented at all our events, tracking the diversity of who applies to the FHSE Film Exhibition Fund and a focus on encouraging applications from producers who identify as working-class



- Funding in the Miles Ketley Memorial Fund grew by 40% and was extended for a further three years, supporting an exciting and diverse slate of 13 filmmakers in 2025, including *The Stimming Pool* co-directors Robin Elliott-Knowles and Georgia Kumari Bradburn

— MILES KETLEY FUND —

13 EMERGING FILMMAKERS SUPPORTED
WITH SCRIPT EDITS, FILMMAKING EQUIPMENT
AND FESTIVAL ATTENDANCE COSTS



ICO ANNUAL REPORT 2025–26

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FINDING THE BEST FILMS FOR AUDIENCES

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PROVIDING CHOICE FOR AUDIENCES

THE ICO PROGRAMMING NETWORK

Our work is focussed on making independent cinema spaces more inclusive and welcoming for all, with ambitious, creative and responsive programming at the heart of everything we do.

We work in partnership with venues across the UK including independent cinemas, arts and cultural venues, community-run cinemas and film festivals to understand their needs and produce diverse, sustainable and bespoke programmes.

UNIQUE TITLES SHOWN

928

TOTAL ADMISSIONS

1,195,308

GROSS BOX OFFICE

£8,836,990

ICO CLIENT VENUES

- ACT ONE, LONDON
- BARN CINEMA, TOTNES
- BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL
- BROADWAY CINEMA, NOTTINGHAM
- CHICHESTER CINEMA AT NEW PARK



- CINEMARSH, NEW ROMNEY
- DERBY QUAD
- ELECTRIC PALACE CINEMA, HARWICH
- FORUM CINEMA, NORTHAMPTON
- GLOUCESTER GUILDHALL

- HAVERHILL ARTS CENTRE
- HYDE PARK PICTURE HOUSE, LEEDS
- JAM JAR CINEMA, WHITLEY BAY
- JW3, LONDON
- KILN THEATRE, LONDON
- LUDLOW ASSEMBLY ROOMS
- MARKET PAVILION, BLYTH



- MALVERN THEATRES
- MAREEL, LERWICK
- NORTHAMPTON FILMHOUSE

- NOVA CINEMA, WOKING
- PHOENIX, LEICESTER
- SHOWROOM WORKSTATION, SHEFFIELD
- STAMFORD ARTS CENTRE
- STOKE FILM THEATRE, STOKE-ON-TRENT
- TOWNER EASTBOURNE
- TYNESIDE CINEMA, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE



- WARWICK ARTS CENTRE, COVENTRY
- WATERSHED, BRISTOL
- WELLINGTON ORBIT, TELFORD

TOP 10 PERFORMING TITLES

AT ICO CLIENT VENUES



HAMNET #1
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£534,000
ADMISSIONS
67,000

THE SALT PATH #2
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£304,000
ADMISSIONS
38,000

MARTY SUPREME #3
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£276,000
ADMISSIONS
33,000

WUTHERING HEIGHTS #4
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£256,000
ADMISSIONS
32,000

DOWNTON ABBEY:
THE GRAND FINALE #5
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£240,000
ADMISSIONS
31,000

THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND #6
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£215,000
ADMISSIONS
25,000

THE CHORAL #7
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£212,000
ADMISSIONS
27,000

WICKED: FOR GOOD #8
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£184,000
ADMISSIONS
25,000

ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER #9
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£176,000
ADMISSIONS
22,000



THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME #10
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£167,000
ADMISSIONS
20,000

TOP 10 TOP FOREIGN LANGUAGE TITLES

AT ICO CLIENT VENUES



HOLY COW #10
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£34,000
ADMISSIONS
4,300

MY FATHER'S SHADOW #9
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£35,000
ADMISSIONS
4,500

THE VOICE OF HIND RAJAB #8
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£37,000
ADMISSIONS
4,300

PALESTINE 36 #7
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£41,000
ADMISSIONS
5,100

IT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT #6
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£43,000
ADMISSIONS
5,400

NOUVELLE VAGUE #5
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£44,000
ADMISSIONS
5,400



SIRAT #4
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£55,000
ADMISSIONS
6,400

THE SECRET AGENT #3
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£80,000
ADMISSIONS
9,800



SENTIMENTAL VALUE #2
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£108,000
ADMISSIONS
13,000



NO OTHER CHOICE #1
GROSS BOX OFFICE
£134,000
ADMISSIONS
16,000



PROGRAMMING TRENDS

Although the past year brought small increases in box office and audience numbers nationally, many cinemas continue to face a difficult and fragile market. A handful of mainstream titles still dominate box office performance, even as a broader range of releases worked to secure the remaining share.

At the same time, the rapid expansion of Premium Large Format (PLF) screens in the commercial sector has made it harder for independent venues to compete with the scale of investment behind these facilities. However, independent cinemas have seen growing interest in 35mm screenings, particularly among younger audiences eager to experience celluloid and learn more about the craft and technical processes of film.

Audience tastes are changing, and the demographics of audiences have also changed with greater demand for complementary activity around screenings, including special events, talks and presentations. This is what the independent sector has pioneered and what creates community in many cinemas, but it does require additional resources, both financial and human.

Meanwhile, some release weeks are oversaturated with independent films, making it harder for cinemas to know what to prioritise, with public awareness for most titles spread too thin to generate healthy audiences.

However, there were many success stories across the sector. British features and literary adaptations performed strongly for the ICO network, with *Hamnet*, *The Salt Path*, *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale*, *The Ballad of Wallis Island*, *The Choral*, *The Roses* and *H Is For Hawk* all appearing in our top 20 titles. These results show that audiences for upmarket British films remain highly reliable for independent cinemas. A considered programming strategy and ICO advocacy greatly supported the success of these titles in the network. For *The Choral*, for example, we worked with Sony to bring traditionally off-date, venues like Towner Eastbourne onto the film's on-date release. Towner went on to deliver an exceptional opening weekend, placing in the top 25 sites nationally despite operating a single screen and limited opening hours.



**“
It’s never felt like
just a programmer
relationship. They
come with so much
data and just an
eagerness to help**

Independent cinemas tend to have extremely loyal audiences. Understanding what drives this loyalty and why audiences choose to support specific venues is vital for their long-term survival.

Cinemas that do this well can perform ahead of the market and generate great success with films that have limited audience awareness or seemingly niche appeal. In 2025, the wider industry grew 1% against 2024, but, based on Numero reporting many ICO venues far exceeded this. Jam Jar Whitley Bay were up 7.5% on their previous year, while Phoenix Leicester, despite closing two days a week, saw their box office grow 5.9%, a very strong demonstration of support from their local audience and a testament to the community-focused work they do.

Cinemas that are known for innovation, producing interesting repertory programmes, and frequently eventising new releases, also see growth ahead of the market. Tyneside Newcastle were up 4.4% in 2025, while Watershed Bristol grew their box office by 7.2%.

These cinemas are vital to the creation and sustainability of a wider ecosystem of thriving independent and international film. Despite being composed of only 30 cinemas, many of which operate part-time or have only one or two screens, ICO sites frequently overperform on foreign language film and are key in engaging both diaspora and broader audiences for quality arthouse cinema. Our market share on

international awards releases is particularly impressive: ICO sites represented a 13% market share for *The Voice of Hind Rajab* and *My Father's Shadow*, 15% for *Sirat* and 17% for *Nouvelle Vague*.

The value of independent cinemas to UK cities and towns – not only in their cultural and economic benefits but also in the deeper, often hidden work they do to support local communities – is well evidenced. But there is an urgent need for funding for infrastructure and skills development to maintain and grow the sector. In a market that is pushing towards premium experiences and formats, independent cinemas will have to upgrade their spaces and screens to remain competitive. This requires a significant injection of capital funding that there is currently extremely limited provision for. Similarly, cinemas that can support a range of technical formats like 70mm and 35mm are in great demand.

Within the ICO network we see a strong increase in audience figures for new releases shown on different formats, with a particular uptick in younger audiences. But the skills to project these films are diminishing, and cinemas need more support to train the next generation of technical staff.



“
If we were programming our own cinema we wouldn't be able to negotiate the rates with the distributors or get particular films

SCREENING DAYS

We want independent cinemas to be able to select the best films for existing and new audiences. Independent cinemas mark themselves out not only by responding to local tastes, but also stimulating them.

Building trust, thoughtful curation and long-term audience development are at the heart of what makes independent cinemas special. But none of that is possible if you can't make informed decisions about what you put on screen.

In 2025, there were 1,092 films released to UK cinemas. No cinema team can feasibly watch half as many titles, yet among them are the crucial films that make cinemas distinctive and an asset to the local community.

Enter Screening Days. Our national conference programme gives people at all stages of their film exhibition career the chance to watch films, connect with peers and make plans about how they can attract new and existing audiences. Across four seasonal events, our programme is the largest gathering of cinema professionals in the UK.

NEW DELEGATES

20%

UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS

333

UNIQUE ATTENDEES

742

63

76%

OF FILMS SCREENED WERE MADE AVAILABLE TO WATCH ONLINE

56%

OF FILMS SCREENED HAD DESCRIPTIVE SUBTITLES

44%

OF FILMS SCREENED WERE FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILMS

38%

OF FILMS SCREENED WERE DIRECTED BY WOMEN

37%

WERE MADE BY BLACK, ASIAN AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE FILMMAKERS

27%

OF FILMS SCREENED WERE BRITISH FILMS

Regional access is at the heart of why we host Screening Days. If you work in central London, you can attend regular distributor screenings. But if you work outside the M25 and want to know whether a much-hyped indie film, or a new specialist documentary will work for your audiences, it's hard to justify the travel costs.

Across multiple days of in-person screenings, we handpick the best titles for indie exhibitors to preview, allowing them to gather, discuss and consider their programming options in advance of release date, in one place and in locations that are more accessible than regular London visits or festival travel.

Our feedback indicates this allows for more thoughtful programming choices. Programming is about more than *which* films to programme, it's also about *how* to programme them. How long to show a film for, how to plan audience outreach, how to create an event around a film, what screening partners to consider: all of this is long-term work and Screening Days is the best platform to consider it from.

Our curation reflects our desire to allow more people to access stories that are meaningful to their lives. We focus on British independent and world cinema titles. On average, our

programming is made up of a third of films by Black, Asian and ethnically diverse filmmaking teams. We produce descriptive subtitles for as many films as possible, meaning more professionals who are Deaf or hard of hearing can participate. We return these files free of charge to distributors so they can be used in their releases, an access provision that may otherwise be outside of their budget.

One of the long tail positive effects of the pandemic has been our continued commitment to online access, with most Screening Days films also available online. This has massively increased the number of films watched by participants, with 2,282 streams across Spring Screening Days alone; an average of five and a half films per attendee. In evaluation responses, most attendees say that 'I wasn't thinking about programming X but now will', and it's clear that exposure at Screening Days is a major route to exhibitors discovering unique films.



“
*Out of all the things
I go to within the
industry, Screening
Days is my favourite*



“*Screening Days provides an opportunity to network with others in a welcoming and low-stress environment*”

TOP 10 FILMS BY AUDIENCE SCORE AT SPRING + AUTUMN SCREENING DAYS 2025-26

#1
THE VOICE
OF HIND
RAJAB



84%

#2
THE
PRESIDENT'S
CAKE



82%

#3
HAMNET



80%

#4
KOKUHO



79%

#5
THE
SECRET
AGENT



77%

#6
DJ AHMET



75%

JOINT
THE
STRANGER



75%

#7
NOUVELLE
VAGUE



74%

#8
TUNER



71%

JOINT
FAMILIAR
TOUCH



71%

333

ORGANISATIONS
AT SCREENING DAYS
2025-26



“
From a distribution standpoint, the ability to come and present our films in front of an audience and then have the time to discuss them is invaluable and rewarding



AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT DAYS

It can be hard for independent cinemas to gather for collective problem solving. It's all too easy to work in an organisational silo, without time to understand where common issues lie or to be able to share successes with a wider group. At the Audience Development Days we run before Spring and Autumn Screening Days, we invite theatrical exhibitors to gather to hear inspiring case studies, workshop common problems and learn from industry intelligence and research. It's also become a platform for experimentation, where cinemas can consider strategies to develop new audiences, try them in their own settings and report back on their results next time.

“
I really appreciate the ICO's commitment to get a range of different voices in the room and make those spaces accessible

ID SCREENING DAYS

The promise of independent cinemas is that they are highly responsive spaces, which provide an opportunity for audiences to watch films that both reflect their own lives but also explore other cultures and ideas that they are not familiar with. A space for connection and cohesion across people from all backgrounds. This is the aspiration that we embed in all our Screening Days events, and we give it special focus at our annual Inclusion and Diversity Screening Days.

This year's event explored ways to help venues show a broader range of films to a broader range of people, find and support staff from across society and be an asset for everyone in the community.

Against a backdrop of increasing social division in the UK, this year we considered routes for venues to be driven by social and community value while maintaining sustainability. We curated a programme of presentations, talks and workshops with many session ideas selected from a national open call, giving a wider range of voices the chance to speak from our platform.

Topic areas included a look at programming the full breadth of African cinema; building a trans inclusive culture in cinema organisations; how to programme progressively and confidently in divisive contexts; practical tips for welcoming people with disabilities; meaningful working-class inclusion in audiences and staffing; and building cross-community connections with film.

ATTENDEES

128

UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS

82

UNDER 30s

40%

YOUNG AUDIENCE SCREENING DAYS

With some research finding that Gen Z are the most frequent cinemagoers, there are major opportunities for independent cinemas to embrace this active audience.

How can we best respond to the broad and unique tastes of this generation, who are hungry for compelling reasons to leave the house? And how can we build a new generation of young cinephiles, encouraging young children to experience a wider range of stories than those offered by the Hollywood studio system? At Young Audiences Screening Days, we spent two days looking at successful models to reach children and audiences aged 16–24.

— UNIQUE ORGANISATIONS —

87

Topics included how to design screening experiences for SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) children; how to engage young audiences with international arthouse and experimental film; how cinema spaces can offer a radical tool for care and act as community anchors for young people; how to deliver low-cost, inclusive events for children of all ages, backgrounds and abilities in cinemas and alternative spaces; and how CULTPLEX, an independent Manchester cinema, developed a loyal, engaged young audience with 50% aged under 28 years old.

The film programme showcased three upcoming releases – *The Legend of Ochi*, *Savages* and *Future Council* – plus three festival favourites exploring the challenges of young people’s often rocky road to adult life: *Brides*, *Christy* and *Sorry, Baby*.

— ATTENDEES —

159

— UNDER 30s —

48%

PIONEERING FILMS FOR NEW AUDIENCES

DISTRIBUTION

UK cinemas have a phenomenal choice of films to choose from in new release distribution.

With our distribution projects, we aim to make cultural interventions into what is available for UK cinemas to put on their screens. Our focus is on making a pathway between 'niche' audiences and screen content that gives them a direct invitation to come to the cinema. In this way, we aim to provide cinemas with a bridge to audiences that may feel otherwise excluded.



UNCOMMON VOICES

EXPLORING CLASS IN NEW BRITISH CINEMA

Working class audiences are often excluded from independent cinemas and filmmaking opportunities alike.

Recent research suggests that 61% of creative film production roles are filled by people from privileged backgrounds. We wanted to highlight working class talent behind the camera and give audiences a wide lens on what working class life looks like in the UK today. Selected by filmmaker and curator Nia Childs and instigated by BFI FAN Champion Linnea Pettersson, we offered a programme of recent short films, spanning documentaries, flights of fancy and realism. We toured the programme around the UK, often with Q&A sessions and working class filmmaker networking sessions.

SUPPORTED BY THE BFI FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

“
The ICO’s longstanding commitment to diversity in exhibition meant they really went above and beyond to support the programme



FFASIWN, THE FILM DIR: CHARLOTTE JAMES, & CLEMENTINE SCHNEIDERMAN



JOURNEY MERCIES DIR: TOMISIN ADEPEJU



NEVER MIND WALNUT STREET DIR: MARTA DYCZKOWSKA



NOCTURNAL DIR: ASHMY JOHNSON



TERENCE DIR: EDEM KELMAN



THREE BULL-MASTIFFS IN A CORNER KITCHEN DIR: PAUL CHAMBERS

CRIP MELODRAMA SHE'S HYSTERICAL

Instigated by curatorial group Crip Cinema Archive, we took the opportunity of BFI FAN's *Too Much: Melodrama on Film* season to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Todd Haynes's *Safe* [1995].

SUPPORTED BY THE BFI FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

Placing the stereotype of the hysterical woman under the microscope, *Safe* was a perfect title to examine disabled women in the genre. The curators produced a programme that centred access and supported both disabled and non-disabled audiences in reframing and contextualising the film's themes, its representation of chronic illness, and 'crip cinema' at large. We delivered a four-event national tour, with audio description, BSL, descriptive subtitles and live captioning for discussions. These access measures and the extensive outreach by curators meant the screenings attracted a majority disabled audience, with post-film events allowing a deepened focus on *Safe*'s themes of disability and hysteria, a lens through which the film has rarely been considered.



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

SUPPORTING PEOPLE & VENUES

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BESPOKE CONSULTANCY FOR VENUES

Across our daily work with independent cinemas, arts centres and film festivals across the UK, we have gathered decades of experience on the strategies that help them thrive. We take that knowledge and offer it as a consultancy service to clients across the UK.

Our consultancy services are bespoke and respond to individual client needs. We carefully scope out each project, looking to deliver the insights that matter most to clients, typically organisations looking to either establish a new cinema or renew an existing one.

We are proud of the many clients we have helped through our consultancy service. Many projects take time to come to fruition or require confidentiality, but in the last year we have:

Offered operational guidance on staffing structure, screening timetable, licensing support and programming strategy for a new London-based cinema

Delivered a feasibility study for a local council on the potential for them to bring part of their estate into use as a cinema

Delivered an audience development and marketing strategy for an established London multi-arts venue to help them unlock Black, Asian and ethnically diverse audiences

Provided distribution strategy on an event cinema slate to a major theatre producer

Produced temporary programming strategy for a regional mixed arts venue establishing cinema within their cultural programme



“
*It was a pleasure to work
with the team, whose expertise,
insight, and collaborative
approach were invaluable*”



RESOURCES FOR VENUES

ICO ENQUIRIES

The ICO's free, email-based enquiries service provides essential support to exhibitors of all kinds across the UK, from new community start-ups to established cinemas.

We answered enquiries on the licensing required to begin screening films in a community, finding rights for repertory titles, routes into cinema careers and more. Our expert advice is available to ensure that everyone who wants to can show films.

— ENQUIRIES ANSWERED —

1,111

Our website's Advice & Support section offers a wide range of practical in-depth resources and free downloadable guides. The most-used resources are 'What licences do I need' and 'How to start a cinema', with the full suite including guides to programming, audience development, marketing, accessibility, environmental sustainability, fundraising, sector reports and advocacy.

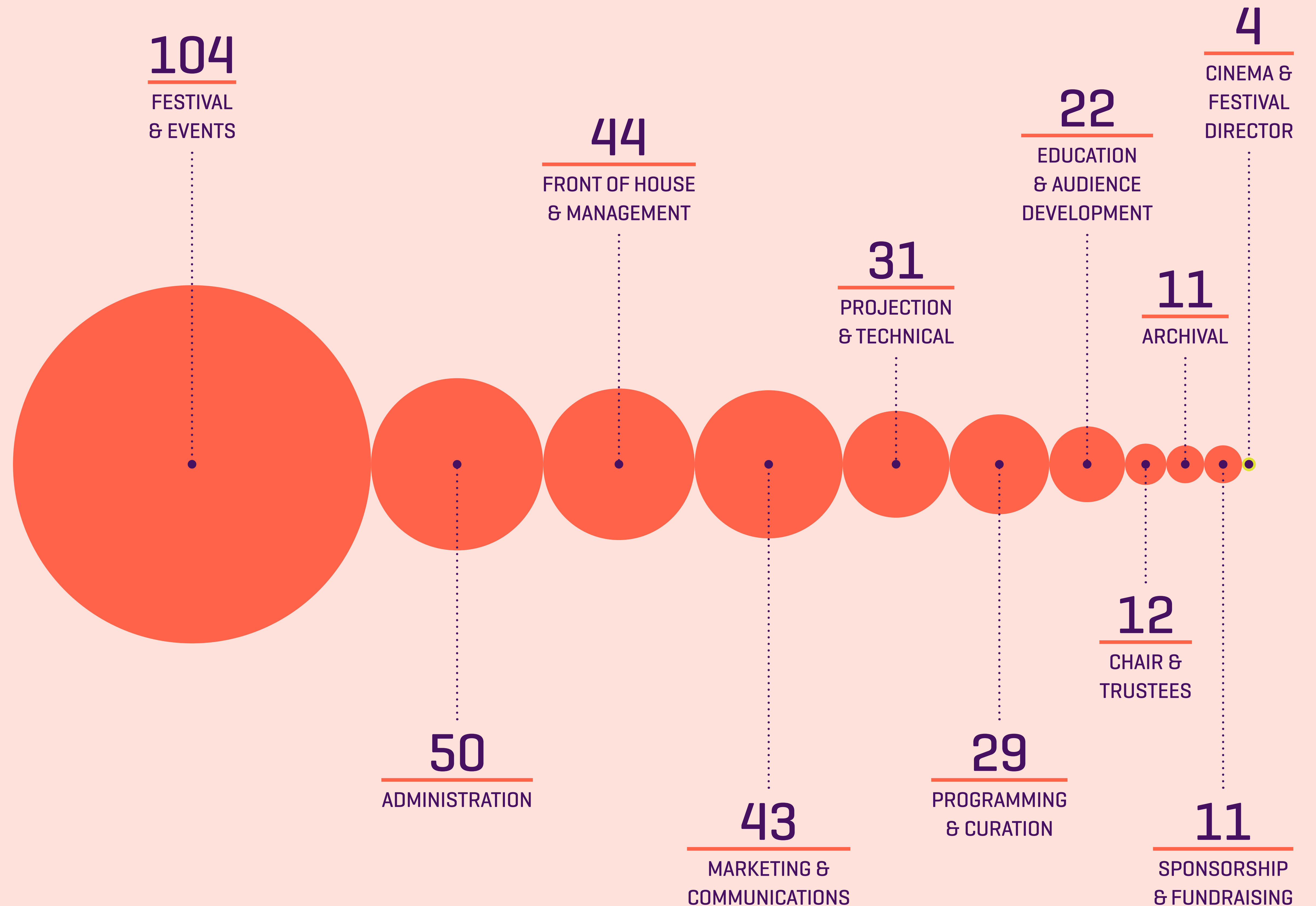
ICO JOBS BOARD

Free-to-use, our Jobs Board plays a key role in making the sector accessible to newcomers. Supporting job seekers and employers alike, it's known within the industry as the essential resource for those looking to work within it or attract the best talent.

We posted over 360 jobs this year, circulating them via our daily jobs e-bulletin to a list of 10k+ subscribers and receiving over 216k web visits, by far the most popular page on our website.

Opportunities posted included jobs from across the UK and at every level of seniority. We are proud that our jobs board criteria and guidance encourage employers to design jobs thoughtfully and with care, helping the sector to be more open and inclusive.

TOP 10 JOB FUNCTIONS ADVERTISED



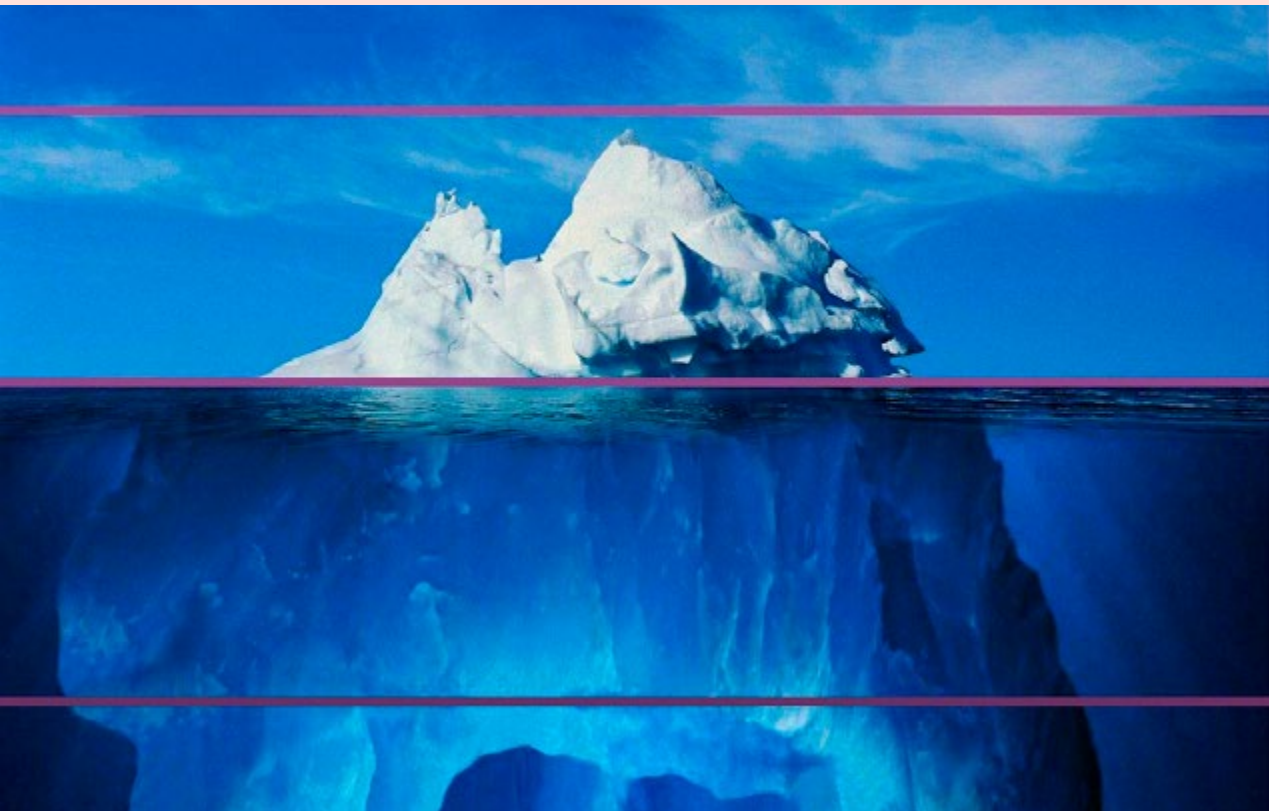
A leading resource for the sector, the ICO blog offers best-practice insights and advice, as well as industry updates and opportunities. It exists to explore solutions to the challenges facing film exhibition, shine a light on issues affecting the sector, champion voices that have historically been underserved, and celebrate the rich diversity of UK cinema culture.

TOTAL VIEWS

20,267

TOP FIVE ICO BLOGS

#1 SCREENING WRONGS
AND SCREENING RIGHTS:
WHAT TO REMEMBER ON YOUR
SEARCH FOR FILM LICENSES



#2 CANNES 2025:
ONES TO WATCH



#3 THE INDEPENDENT CINEMA
OFFICE WELCOMES
THE REPORT ON BRITISH FILM
AND HIGH-END TELEVISION



#4 48 HOURS IN PARIS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE FIAF
PROGRAMMING WINTER SCHOOL



#5 THE SCREENING ABOUT
THE SCREENING: THE VALUE
OF INTERACTIVE SCREENINGS
OF CONTROVERSIAL WORK



SUPPORTING PEOPLE'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TRAINING INITIATIVES

We aim to professionalise the sector to create a more skilled, equitable and diverse workforce. Our interventions take place at every level, helping new people join the industry as well as providing tailored professional development opportunities as careers progress.

COUNTRIES

14

ORGANISATIONS

395

TRAINEES

471



“
It helped me realise that no matter the size and structure of our organisations, we are all facing similar challenges

REACH

STRATEGIC AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

Attracting new and diverse audiences remains a key focus for independent cinemas. REACH is a workshop-based, project-focused training programme that aims to help exhibitors develop strategic skills to expand and diversify their audiences.

REACH centres on participants preparing and executing a real-world audience development project throughout the course. Each project is shaped by their organisation's own audience objectives and local context – whether that means establishing new audience relationships with an entirely original project or analysing the growth potential of existing audience segments.

Funded by the BFI Film Audience Network, the sixth edition of REACH brought together 15 participants from independent UK exhibitors. The first module explored how to understand, research, and build audiences, including strategies for reaching diverse groups. The programme was delivered by experts

with a strong track record of supporting venues and festivals with wide-ranging audience challenges and ambitions. Delegates then applied this learning by designing their own audience development project for delivery.

Projects realised during this edition of the course included new accessibility initiatives, a series of socially focused screenings with reduced-price tickets for communities facing financial barriers, a programme of events marking a cinema's 125th anniversary, and a season of South Asian films co-created with local residents. On average, each delegate welcomed around 200 people to their project activity.

DEVELOPING YOUR SPONSORSHIP STRATEGY

Film festivals are a crucial element of UK film exhibition, especially as audiences’ appetite for eventised screenings continues to grow.

Developing Your Sponsorship Strategy was a new short-form training programme funded by the BFI Film Audience Network to help festivals grow their revenue. Led by the ICO and featuring case studies from Toronto International Film Festival, Sheffield DocFest and Montrose LandxSea Film Fest, the 27 participants learned how to define and articulate the value of their organisation and create a compelling sponsorship pitch deck.

At the end of the course, all participants were invited to a pitching session where they could practice delivering their sponsorship presentations to industry experts and peers, receive feedback, and refine their pitches before approaching potential sponsors. One of the programme’s most valued elements was drawing inspiration from the rest of the cohort and building a network of film exhibition professionals working in sponsorship.



“
*It was inspiring to come together,
meet people and share ideas*”

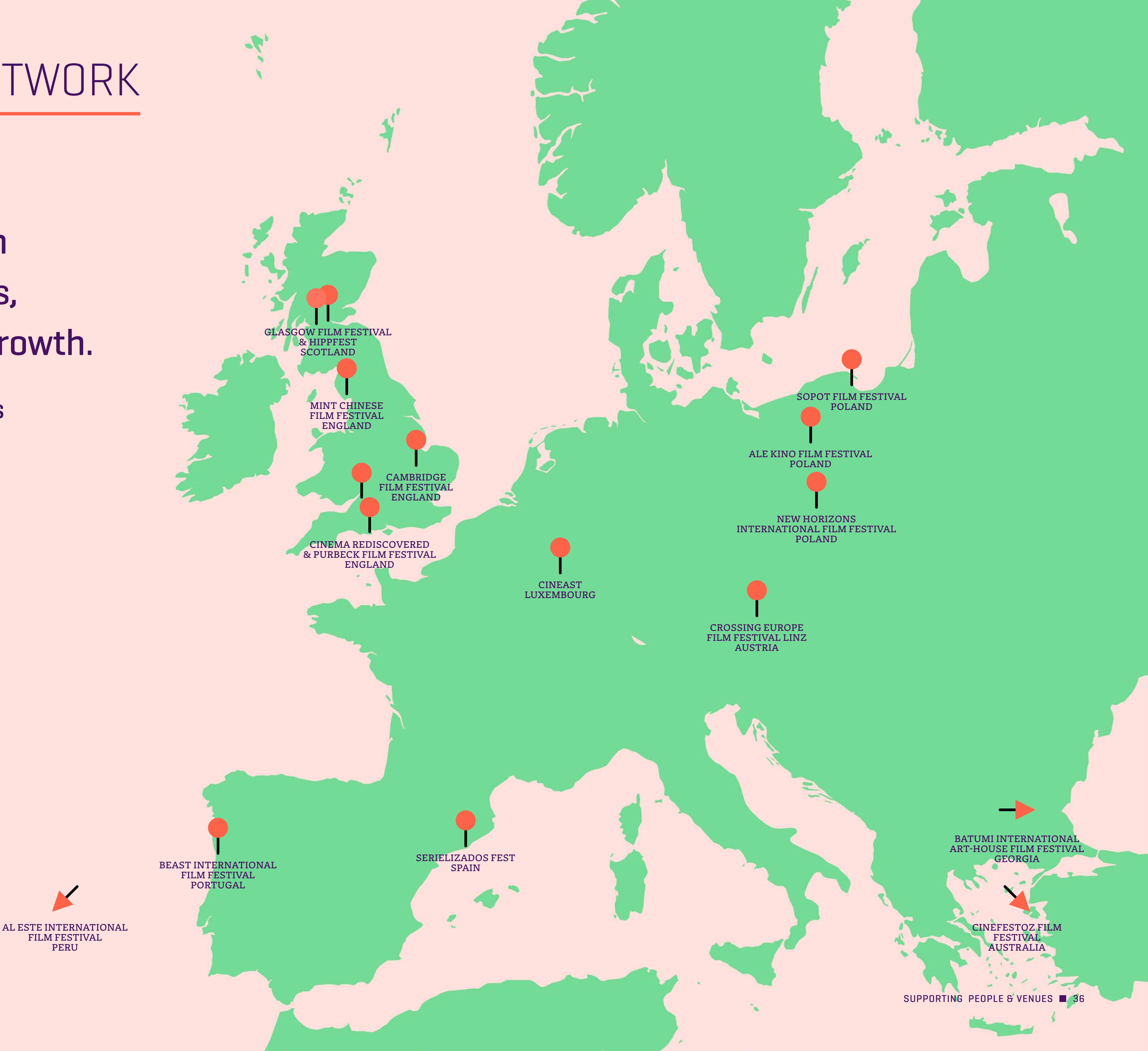
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL NETWORK

The IFFN brings together film festivals from across the world to strengthen connections, share expertise and support each other’s growth.

It was created after supporting international film festivals for more than a decade with our pioneering Developing Your Film Festival programme, recommended to peers by 100% of the 300 course alumni.

Whilst only established a few years ago, the IFFN has already brought together 17 festivals from nine countries across three continents, representing a combined annual audience of 300,000 filmgoers. We host regular webinars or meet ups at major film festivals so members can share challenges, explore emerging trends and celebrate successes.

In summer 2025 we ran our second International Festival Summit for IFFN members in Wrocław, Poland, delivered in collaboration with TAURON New Horizons International Film Festival. With industry guests from Sundance and Gothenburg Film Festivals, the summit gave attendees the opportunity to exchange insights, as well as make new connections and seek out collaborations. Driven by member requests, we explored a series of topics central to modern festival-making including shifting attitudes among festival audiences, how to manage a festival effectively with limited resources, and the growing scrutiny on film festival programming teams.



ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORM

The ICO online learning platform is a well-established hub for low-cost professional development in film exhibition. Internationally accessible, it allows people to learn at their own pace.

The platform offers a wide range of courses on topics including programming, marketing, audience development, environmental sustainability, front-of-house, and film festivals.

In March 2026, we launched the Accessibility Across the Board course as part of our BFI Film Audience Network activity. Adapting our 2024 in-person course of the same name, it offers practical steps to help organisations create a more accessible and inclusive culture and environment for disabled audiences and staff.

Created in partnership with Charlie Little (Access Consultant, Matchbox Cine), the course explores key principles of meaningful access provision through presentations and case studies from Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham Hippodrome, Scottish Queer International Film Festival and Matchbox Cine. It provides a sample Disability Action Plan that students can adapt and use in their organisation.

NEW ENROLMENTS

254



LESSONS COMPLETED

4,500+



“
*Perfectly pitched and incredibly
informative, up to date and really
filled a gap in my knowledge*

GETTING FILMS TO AUDIENCES

GET IT SEEN

After 10 years, we were delighted to relaunch Get It Seen – our development programme for UK-based producers – with support from the BFI Creative Challenge Fund.

Get It Seen is designed to give participating producers the opportunity to develop a clear release plan for their upcoming project to get it seen by audiences, and the rare chance to connect in depth with leading industry professionals from across sales, distribution and exhibition.

It began with an intensive three-day lab covering the roles of UK distribution and sales companies, current market trends, identifying the best festival markets for a particular title, the practicalities of a theatrical release, and audience development for independent films.

Following the lab, we paired the 16 participating producers with individual mentors to help them develop audience strategy and distribution plans. At the end of the programme, participants attended a Pitching Morning with industry stakeholders from Altitude, Hanway, Bankside, Embankment, Architect and Protagonist to apply their learnings and gain further valuable experience.

REVISITING YOUR CINEMA BUSINESS MODEL

BUILDING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

For venues to prosper as dynamic and creative organisations within their local communities, they must also be financially sustainable. To help venues strengthen their business models and build long-term resilience, we developed the RYCBM training programme in 2024 with support from BFI FAN.

Senior leaders from 14 venues across the UK took part in this second edition, developing skills in financial planning and reporting, sustainable capital development, maximising commercial income, and sponsorship and philanthropy. Six expert mentors were paired with participating venues, offering dedicated sessions focused on their specific business needs.

Participants valued the chance to come together with like-minded professionals from similar organisations. As a result, they now have a new network of cinema leaders with whom they can collaborate to address common issues.

Following the first edition, we commissioned a report on the programme's longer-term impacts. Conducted by independent evaluator Jim Barratt (Bigger Picture Research), the report found that the course delivered clear value in developing business capabilities across the independent cinema sector. It was praised for its format, which allowed time for reflection, benchmarking and validation. Attendees said the training and mentoring they received gave momentum to developments within their business, such as the launch of new ticketing schemes or the development of capital projects.



“
We’ve taken full advantage of the place-based marketing support which has delivered a 20% increase in sales

SOUTH EAST PROJECTS

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST	41
YOUNG FILM NETWORK	48
BFI NETWORK	50

INCREASING AUDIENCE CHOICE

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

As the lead organisation for Film Hub South East [FHSE], part of the BFI Film Audience Network, we aim 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.

As well as providing direct support for audience development projects through the Film Exhibition Fund, the Too Much: Melodrama on Film nationwide season and the Spotlight programme, we also help exhibitors connect with audiences via peer-to-peer initiatives like the Programming Group and Short Film Exhibitors Group.

FILM EXHIBITION FUND PROJECTS SUPPORTED

30

FHSE IN-PERSON ADMISSIONS

59,463

TOTAL FUNDS AWARDED BY FHSE 2025-26

£266,276

FILM EXHIBITION FUND

The Film Exhibition Fund (FEF) is our primary mechanism for supporting regional exhibitors to deliver cultural film programmes to broad and diverse audiences. This year, 30 projects were supported, totalling £196,648 of National Lottery funding.

Screenings took place in 19 counties in the South East, reaching 54,368 people [a net increase of 9% over the last three years]. Across the Hub, supported initiatives ranged from large-scale festivals and year-round cinema programmes to grassroots community screenings, youth-led projects and specialist seasons exploring heritage, XR and themed programming. Together these activities spanned theatrical and non-theatrical spaces, combining ambitious film programming with outreach, partnerships and access-led initiatives designed to reach new and underrepresented audiences across the region.

[READ A FULL ROUNDUP ON OUR WEBSITE](#)

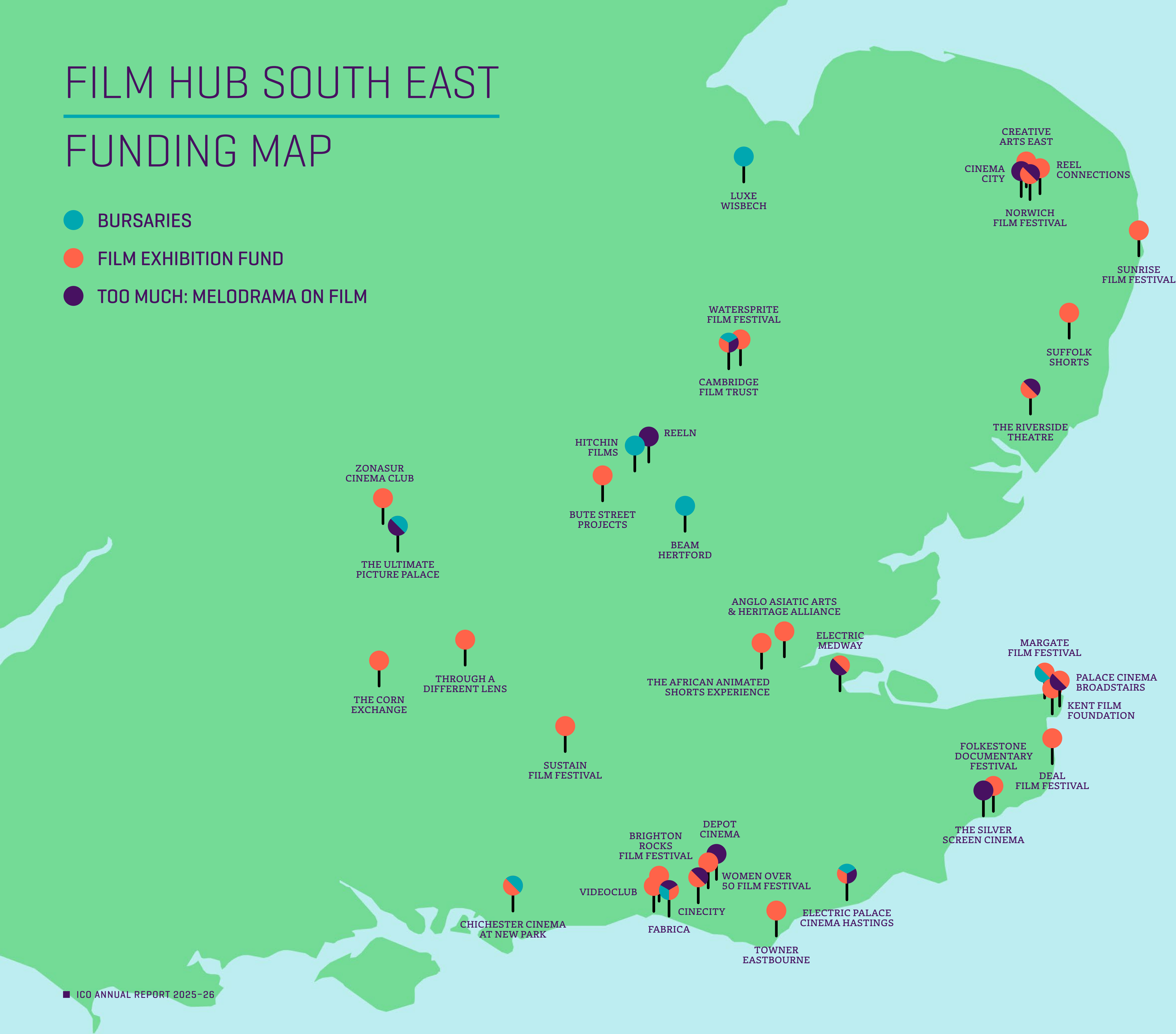


“
By participating in opportunities presented by FHSE, we gain knowledge, contacts and confidence

FILM HUB SOUTH EAST

FUNDING MAP

- BURSARIES
- FILM EXHIBITION FUND
- TOO MUCH: MELODRAMA ON FILM



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

TOO MUCH: MELODRAMA ON FILM

Ten exhibitors in the South East participated in the UK-wide season Too Much: Melodrama on Film, presenting emotionally rich, visually bold works that explored the history of cinematic melodrama and engaging 2,837 people across the region.

The season inspired a wide range of creative activity across the region. Depot in Lewes brought staff from across its organisation into the programming process, delivering events from a live-music screening of *The Phantom of the Opera* to film-club-led screenings with archive shorts, talks, a DJ night and a zine workshop.

Cinecity in Brighton engaged younger audiences through a “gaslighting” double bill of *Gaslight* and *Rebecca*, supported by targeted marketing on the origins of the term. Electric Palace Hastings engaged young people through screenings curated by its Young Film Programming team and outreach workshops with Bexhill College, plus Student Saturdays for under-25s and Classic Sundays for over-60s. In partnership with local organisations, they delivered a neurodivergent-friendly, relaxed and wheelchair-accessible screening at The NEST, working with a team of young neurodivergent curators to select and introduce a screening of *Johnny Guitar*.

In addition, ten young programmers based in four organisations as part of Young Film Network South East were supported to conceptualise and deliver screenings reaching 32% audiences aged under 25 and gaining skills through workshops on programming, marketing, budgeting and project management. Participating venues were Electric Medway in Rochester, Riverside Cinema in Suffolk, ReelN in Hertfordshire, and CinemaCity in Norwich.



“*Thematic film pairings and event elements made each screening feel both unique and memorable*”

BUILDING CREATIVE & SUSTAINABLE VENUES

SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEMBERS

Our Hub training programme focused on organisational sustainability through a series of online webinars that covered running an exhibition organisation strategically, building new financial partnerships within your local community, and leveraging established partnerships to reach new people.

140

FHSE MEMBERS ATTENDED HUB TRAINING EVENTS

“
The Forum provided tangible next steps to support our ambitions around sustainability and environmental impact



ANNUAL FORUM

FHSE members came together to share learning from successful audience development projects — including approaches to engaging families and using archive film — hear the latest sector trends, and build new connections across the region. The event was extremely well received, with participants rating the content 4.6 out of 5.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate our commitment to empowering exhibitors in the South East, strengthening the sector and expanding access to film for audiences across the region.



PROGRAMMING GROUP

We continue to strengthen independent cinemas across the South East by helping venues programme a wider range of independent films — from sharing insight on upcoming releases to providing early access to preview titles — and by creating space for members to exchange learning on what is working well and where challenges remain. This year, we also subsidised screenings of independent family and children’s titles to expand the offer beyond mainstream Hollywood content, enabling members to reach twice as many families as last year.



SHORT FILM EXHIBITORS GROUP

The newly expanded and re-named Short Film Exhibitors Group, has quickly become a vital support for short film exhibitor organisations in the region, particularly those in underserved areas for cultural film. With expert guest speakers and peer discussion on sponsorship, volunteer management and income models, the group has helped exhibitors share knowledge, reduce costs and become more resilient.



BURSARIES

We supported 11 members with bursaries to attend vital professional development opportunities, from technical and fundraising training to key sector events and festivals.

SPOTLIGHT

PETERBOROUGH



Spotlight is our targeted investment programme addressing geographical gaps in cultural film provision in the South East. The programme entered its third and final iteration this year, led by Gateway Film Festival.

15 community organisations were supported to develop film screening activities rooted in their own audiences and spaces, including libraries, community gardens, cultural venues, theatres, churches and a gaming lounge.

Many partners entered the programme with little or no experience of film exhibition and were supported to test activity, build skills and grow confidence through mentoring, peer learning and equipment sharing.

In this final year, several partners were leading activity independently, securing their own funding, embedding film into organisational planning and developing ambitions for ongoing programmes. One key outcome has been the establishment of the Peterborough Film Network to share learning, strengthen partnerships and support future collaboration.

Spotlight has enabled culturally specific and community-led programming, including the city's first Bengali Film Festival, outdoor cinema screenings and targeted work with young people, families and underserved communities. It has shifted Peterborough's film landscape towards a more confident, connected and sustainable model, with strong foundations in place for legacy beyond its end, and increased opportunity for the people of Peterborough to watch a wider range of films.

“

Spotlight has raised the expectation of low-income families and created a safe, welcoming and accessible event

YOUNG FILM NETWORK

BFI FILM ACADEMY

The Young Film Network, supported by BFI Film Academy, focuses on increasing access to and appreciation of cultural cinema among 16–25-year-olds, and helping them take their first steps into the film industry.

We delivered a series of in-person events across the region, each designed to introduce young people to the film industry and connect them with practitioners and emerging talent. At Turner Contemporary in Margate, we hosted a networking event with a screening of BFI NETWORK short films, while a careers day at Depot in Lewes introduced young people to roles in exhibition and distribution. In Southend-on-Sea, Southend Youth Council screened their own short films, followed by a Q&A with emerging filmmakers. At Sunrise Film Festival in Suffolk, participants heard from experts on how to make film sets accessible for people with disabilities. We rounded out the in-person programme with a careers day at Cambridge Film Festival featuring speakers from Watersprite Film Festival and Vertigo Releasing on how to begin a career in film.

To remove access barriers, we also delivered online events in partnership with TAPE Collective and Film East, covering essential topics like festival submissions, writing film criticism and collaborating to make short films.

We supported three organisations to deliver dedicated programmes for young people: Watersprite Film Festival’s year-round screenings, Margate Film Festival’s Industry Day, and Lion Mountain Entertainment’s Production to Exhibition Lab, with speakers including *Kneecap* producer Jack Tarling and Oscar-winning director Chris Overton.



— YOUNG FILM NETWORK PARTICIPANTS —

850



“*Really enjoyable and informative. It helped me get a better perspective of low-budget filmmaking; I now feel inspired to pursue making my first feature film*”

SHORT CUT FILM FUND

We supported two young filmmakers, Fiona Poda and Aminah Alhamdu, to develop their creative portfolios. Each received £1,000 to produce a five-minute short film, along with bespoke mentorship from a BFI NETWORK filmmaker, a session on festival strategy and a one-to-one meeting with BFI NETWORK talent executives.

BURSARIES

To reduce financial barriers, we awarded bursaries to 25 young people, enabling them to attend regional and national industry events including Cambridge Film Festival, the London Film Festival and sales, exhibition and distribution training in Woking.

SHADOW A FILMMAKER

We placed six young people on BFI NETWORK short film productions, giving them hands-on experience across a range of departments.

SUPPORTING NEW & EMERGING FILMMAKERS

BFI NETWORK SOUTH EAST

As part of our role in developing emerging filmmakers in the South East, we assessed more than 250 applications to the Short Film Fund and the Early Development Fund, recommending support for five writers to develop debut long-form projects and six filmmaking teams to produce new short films. As these projects progressed through development and production, we provided creative oversight and worked closely with the teams.

ALL SUPPORTED WRITERS & FILMMAKERS ARE FEATURED ON THE BFI NETWORK WEBSITE.

Alongside funding, we delivered a strong programme of local professional development and networking opportunities for writers, directors and producers.

EMERGING FILMMAKERS WHO TOOK PART

1,271

ATTENDEES WHO REPORTED THAT THEY ACHIEVED THEIR AIMS

96%



Our Outline script lab supported eight women and non-binary writers to develop new short film scripts, to address ongoing underrepresentation in the wider industry and also within applications to BFI NETWORK South East for funding. We also delivered a series of producer labs in Slough, Colchester and Tunbridge Wells, designed to strengthen early-career producer skills, build confidence and help address regional and socio-economic barriers to entering the industry. Connect & Collab brought our writer and producer cohorts together, sparking new creative partnerships and laying the groundwork for future projects.

“

It really helped the development of my story and also built my confidence as a writer



Our flagship Cambridge Film Festival Industry Day welcomed more than 150 attendees, bringing filmmakers and industry guests together for inspiring Q&As, expert speakers and screenings of BFI NETWORK shorts. Across the region, we also delivered industry panels, screenings and mixers in Chichester, Ashford, Brighton, Folkestone, Margate and Peterborough, offering practical insight into funding, production and progression while celebrating talent in the region.

IMPACT & SUCCESS

BFI NETWORK SOUTH EAST

We continue to see the growing impact of our outreach and talent development programmes, demonstrated by the achievements of several remarkable filmmakers from the region.



A major milestone this year was David Drake’s debut feature *The Long Haul*, developed through the Early Development Fund, which completed production in late 2025 and will premiere at Tribeca Film Festival in June 2026.

We also celebrated Jess O’Kane, whom we supported on their first short *Girl at Party*, premiered their debut feature as a writer, *Bad Apples*, at both Toronto International Film Festival and BFI London Film Festival in 2025, and was named a Screen Star of Tomorrow.

Our supported animation slate also gained strong visibility, with *Traces* and *The Wickywock* and the *JubJub Berry* selected for leading festivals and platforms including the London International Animation Festival and British Shorts Berlin. Regional animator Mansi Maheshwari was selected for the 51st session of La Résidence at the Festival de Cannes, marking a significant step in her international career.

Several filmmakers progressed directly from our development programmes into funding this year, including Alix Eve, who moved from our Outline script lab into the BFI NETWORK Early Development Fund — demonstrating the strength and continuity of our talent pipeline.

We were also pleased to see multiple BFI NETWORK South East-supported filmmakers selected for BFI NETWORK @ LFF. This included Courteney Tan, whose debut feature *Blue* received both Stage 1 and Stage 2 Early Development funding, alongside Josephine Lohoar Self, Jesse Lewis-Reece and Chloe Culpin, all of whom received earlier support from BFI NETWORK South East.

Together, these successes highlight the sustained impact of our work in supporting filmmakers from early development through to major festival premieres, and in helping new voices from the South East reach audiences across the UK and around the world.

ADVOCACY FOR INDEPENDENT CINEMA

SUPPORT
WORKFORCE SURVEY

54
55

ADVOCATING FOR SUPPORT

Over the last two years we have dramatically expanded our advocacy work on behalf of UK independent exhibitors. Our sector is in urgent need of support, and we continue to highlight what help is required and where needs are most acute for cinemas and communities around the country.

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, motivating us more than ever to advocate for the importance of independent cinema in people's creative lives and in communities across the country.



The ICO is recognised as a key stakeholder in the independent exhibition sector, with regular invitations to present evidence and industry intelligence to government. This year, we engaged with the government through DCMS ministerial roundtables, attended meetings with MPs and policy advisors, and contributed to the consultation on business rates. We presented sector evidence to the Northern Culture APPG Cultural Capital Untapped Inquiry to ensure that independent cinemas are recognised in regional and national cultural policy. As well as our in-

person presence at these discussions, we also wrote to the Secretary of State advocating for capital investment in cinema in response to the government's £1.5 billion investment in culture which did not include cinema, and encouraged exhibitors on our mailing list to do the same.

Further afield, we have maintained strong industry representation through our board work with CICAIE and continued membership of CIISA, amplifying the needs of independent cinemas across UK and international forums.

ADVOCATING FOR ACCESS & DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

EXHIBITION WORKFORCE SURVEY

TOTAL RESPONDENTS

620

Each year we undertake a piece of research into the film exhibition sector, exploring topical issues such as capital investment, financial health and workforce conditions, to better understand the sector needs and advocate for it.

In 2022, we published the most comprehensive workforce survey of the UK cinema exhibition sector ever undertaken. Four years on, we surveyed exhibitors again, seeking feedback from professionals, freelancers, volunteers, and anyone who helps audiences access cinema in public spaces.

The result gives an overview of who works in the sector, their experience in the workplace and their skills and development needs. We are using this evidence in our advocacy work with policymakers and funders to help direct investment to where it is needed most to improve equity, working lives and long-term sector sustainability.

40%

OF ALL RESPONDENTS FEEL THEY ARE **NOT** FAIRLY PAID

43%

OF FEMALE RESPONDENTS
FEEL THEY ARE **NOT** FAIRLY PAID

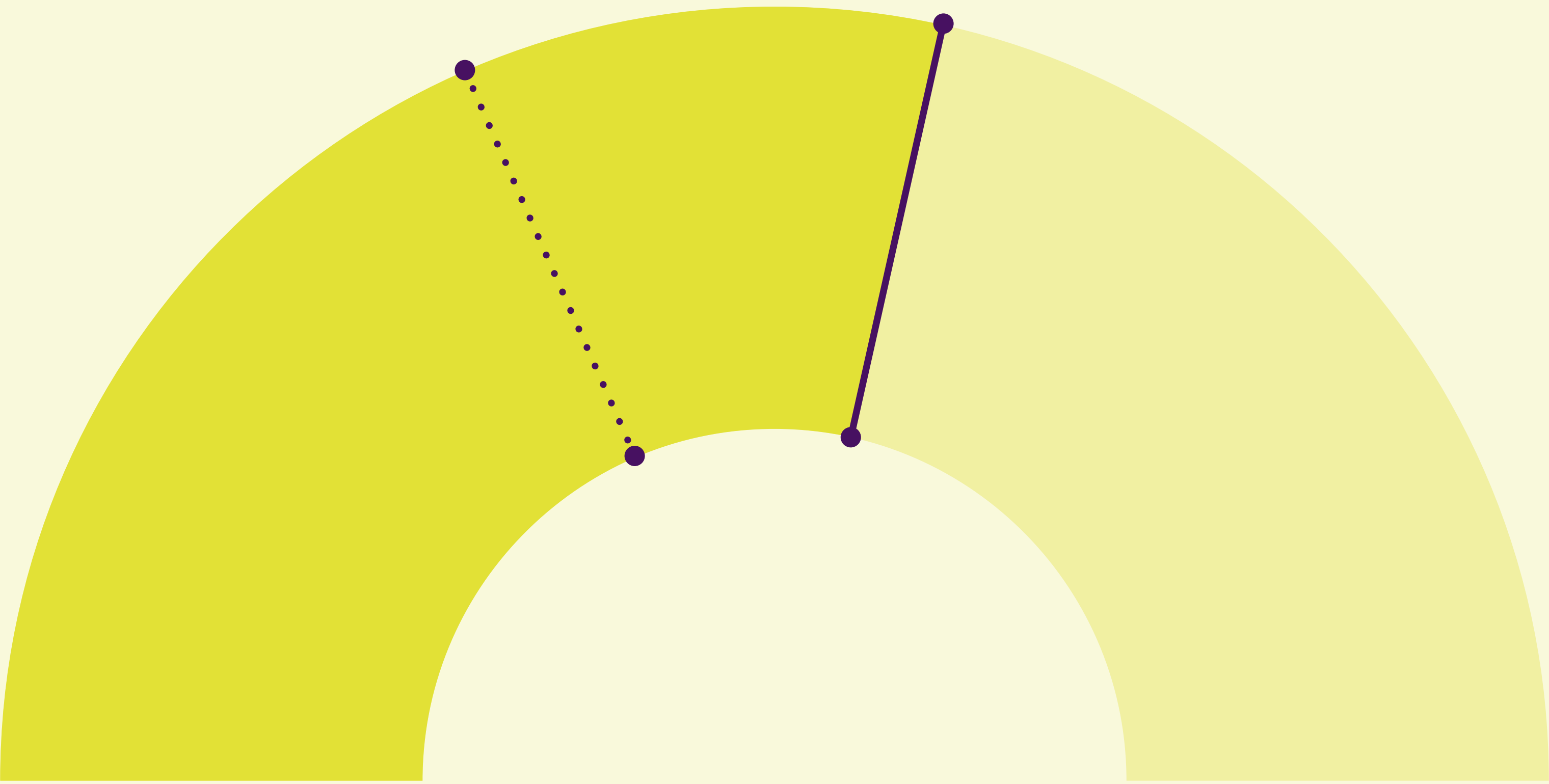
37%

OF MALE RESPONDENTS
FEEL THEY ARE **NOT** FAIRLY PAID

The majority of the workforce come from high socio-economic backgrounds [SEB], which is unchanged from 2022.

37%
HIGH SEB IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

57%
HIGH SEB IN THE EXHIBITION SECTOR



HIGH SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS IN THE GENERAL POPULATION VS EXHIBITION SECTOR

RESPONDENTS UNDER 30

CHANGE FROM 2022

18%

↓ 7%

RESPONDENTS OVER 50

CHANGE FROM 2022

42%

↑ 9%

The ethnic profile of the sector is largely unchanged since 2022

79%

IDENTIFIED AS WHITE
IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

89%

IDENTIFIED AS WHITE
IN THE EXHIBITION SECTOR



34%

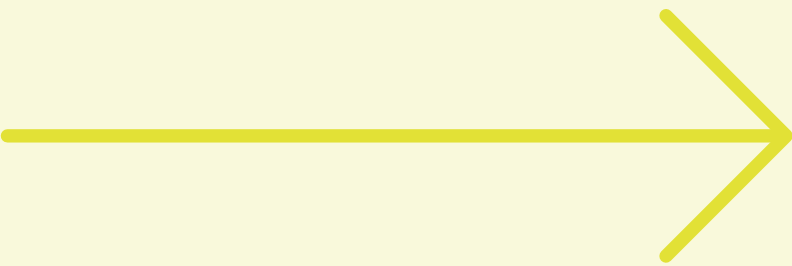
OF RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED
AS HAVING A HEALTH CONDITION,
IMPAIRMENT OR LEARNING DIFFERENCE

24%

OF RESPONDENTS IDENTIFY AS **LESBIAN, GAY, OR
BISEXUAL (LGB)** OR SELF-DESCRIBE IN ANOTHER
WAY, FAR EXCEEDING NATIONAL AVERAGES

80%

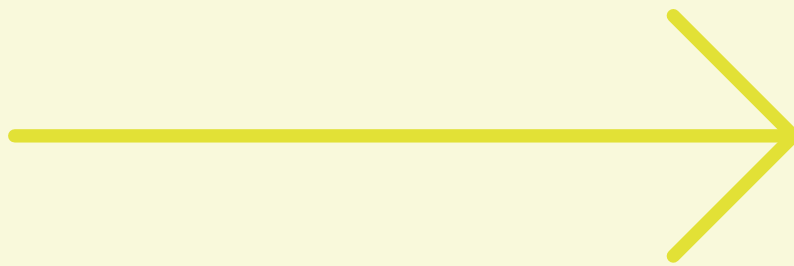
OF RESPONDENTS WORK BEYOND THEIR CONTRACTED HOURS



51%

DID SO 'ALWAYS' OR 'FREQUENTLY'

%



40%

OF THIS OVERTIME IS ENTIRELY UNPAID

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

ACTION PLAN	59
MILES KETLEY FUND	61

ED&I ACTION PLAN

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.

Our Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan (2024-26) looks at all aspects of our organisation’s operations including governance, recruitment, HR, finance and marketing, alongside our deliverable activities. Our ED&I plan is a living document that identifies areas where we need to effect change and records our measurable commitments to do so. It’s designed to ensure that every staff member feels part of this work and responsible for their assigned actions. We publish updates on our progress twice a year and are due to publish a new plan in early 2027, which will include a new dedicated Disability Action Plan.

ED&I: SELECTED UPDATES	ICO accessibility standards at all events	Screening Days audience research	Encouraging applications to our labs from producers who identify as working-class
2025-26	We worked with access consultant Charlie Little to create a comprehensive document to maintain a clear standard of accessibility across all our events.	We commissioned audience consultants Indigo to deliver comprehensive monitoring of who attends Screening Days via qualitative focus groups with attenders and non-attenders. This has given us a clear view of who is currently engaging with the event and areas we can develop to ensure our outreach reaches the widest possible audience.	We maintained a focus on encouraging applications from producers who identify as working-class for our labs via BFI NETWORK South East, seeking to address underrepresentation within the industry. 35% of the 30 selected participants identified as working class against a programme-wide target of 39%.

Tracking who applies to the FHSE Film Exhibition Fund

We began to track
the diversity of the
organisations applying
to the Film Exhibition
Fund, self selected as:

63%

WOMEN-LED

37%

WORKING CLASS-LED

30%

ETHNICALLY DIVERSE-LED

30%

LGBTQIA+-LED

10%

DISABLED-LED

We exceeded our original target of supporting five organisations with diverse-led leadership, reaching a total of 19. As we move into the next three-year funding strategy, we will continue to track the diversity of organisations applying for and receiving support. New targets will be set once we have analysed this data.



Staff and Board: Demographic data

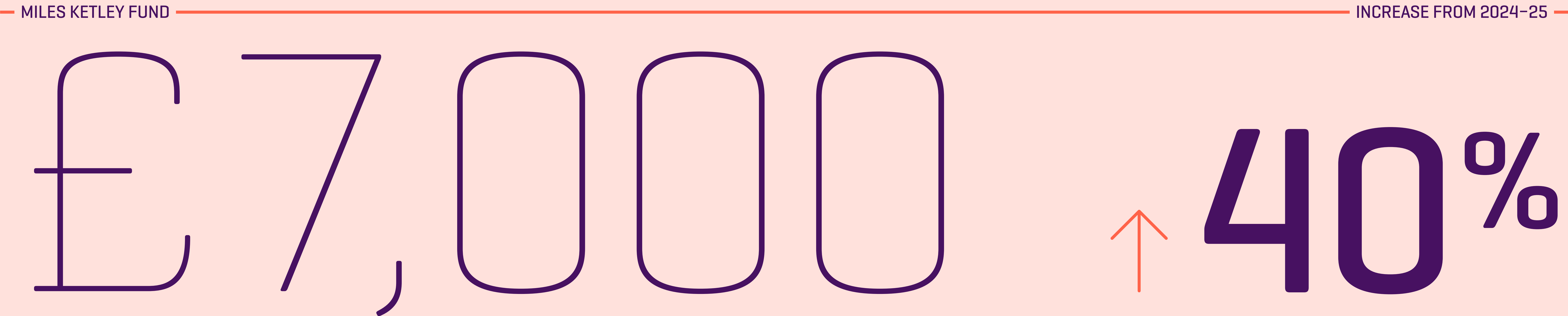
One of our longer-term goals is to ensure our staff and board more directly reflect the diversity of London (where our office is based). We began publishing this demographic data annually in 2021 and have subsequently overhauled our recruitment processes as well as publishing our gender pay gap information. As a small business with 21 employees and high retention rates, opportunities for recruitment are rare but in 2025 we took on seven board members, bringing valuable new experience and skills to the organisation and making us more representative of the London population at a strategic level. We see this as key to achieving our ambition of employing a more representative range of staff by 2030.

THE LATEST REPORT FROM APRIL 2026
IS AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE

MILES KETLEY FUND

Established in 2022 in memory of former ICO trustee and prominent producer Miles Ketley, the Fund reflects his commitment to platforming new voices and nurturing early-career directors and producers. Filmmakers become eligible following participation in ICO Screening Days via the inclusion of feature debuts or short films in our Introducing strand, which showcase new and distinctive filmmaking from across the UK.

This year, we made awards to an exciting and diverse slate of 13 filmmakers, which covered a range of support, including script edits, filmmaking equipment and festival attendance costs. In a significant commitment to future emerging artists, the ICO Board approved an extension of the Fund to run until 2028 at an increased budget of £7,000 per year. With demand for support still high, the ICO hopes this not only aids career progression for individual filmmakers but also contributes to a more equitable, dynamic, and inclusive film culture in the UK.





ADURA ONASHILE



ALI CATTERALL



CHLOE ABRAHAMS



CHLOE WHITE



DIONNE EDWARDS



ENO ENEFIOK



ISHWARI BHALERAO



JOHN OGUNMUYIWA



LEONIE ROUSHAM



LORINE PLAGNOL



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TEAM ICO



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.

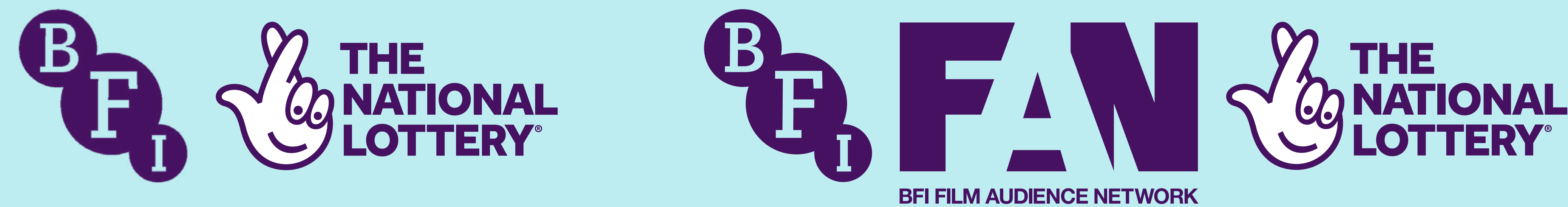
Launched with three members of staff and £120,000, the ICO now employs 21 members of staff and has an annual turnover of £1.8 million. Our work wouldn't be possible without the support of our partners, including funders, distributors, cultural organisations, our clients, and most notably cinemas.

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.

FUNDER



PARTNER



Film Hub South East ↘

Since 2018, the ICO has managed Film Hub South East, part of the BFI Film Audience Network, a collaboration of eight regional hubs led by major film organisations across the UK. Through FHSE, we support cinemas, festivals, film societies and community groups to create meaningful cultural impact, widen access to great films and diversify audiences. We deliver a range of schemes for exhibitors, and we nurture regional filmmaking talent by supporting applications to BFI NETWORK funds. Alongside our regional role, FHSE also leads BFI FAN's UK-wide member support and communications, strengthening sector skills and ensuring effective communication across the network.



OUR BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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AYO AKINGBADE

ARTIST & FILM DIRECTOR

DR ROWAN AUST

ACADEMIC & CONSULTANT

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LAWYER AND FORMER BFI CURATOR

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YI WANG

FOUNDER & DIRECTOR OF QUEER EAST

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Electric Palace, photo by Bani Mendy

Suffolk Shorts, photo by Brad Geller

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Behind the scenes on shoot for *Back Woods*, photo by Layomi Osinowo

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AFCAE, CICAIE and ICO Cannes Film Festival reception

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ZonaSur Cinema Club poster, designed by Nick Hagan from Curio Bookshop, photo by Erika Harloz from Sand and Ray

ICO

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Many thanks to our many wonderful event photographers:

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Andrew Towe

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TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HOW WE
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AND TO HEAR MORE FROM THE ICO
—————> **JOIN OUR MAILING LIST**

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