

***UK Film: Digital innovation and creative excellence
Policy and funding priorities April 2010 to March 2013***

Submission by The British Federation of Film Societies

The British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) is the national agency for the development and support of film societies and community cinemas in the UK. With a vision of 'Cinema for All,' BFFS, a registered charity, has been delivering free advice and practical support for over 60 years.

Our mission is to support, sustain and develop the community cinema movement in the UK, and to deliver public value to community cinema audiences throughout the UK. We do this via a small central office and our volunteer Regional Groups, by researching and providing key data on the sector, raising its profile, actively developing new community cinema and film society ventures, and improving access to specialised film for all communities.

The BFFS operational priorities include the support of community cinema culture, national representation and advocacy, and public education.

This document represents the response from The British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) as submitted via the UK Film Council website.

1. Do you agree with our analysis of the challenges facing film?

The analysis concentrates on the issues concerned with film production, and there is a danger that the value of building audiences for specialised film (including independent British film and archive material) may be overlooked. The link between exhibition and independent film production has been made by US producer Ted Hope (and others), who urges filmmakers to 'curate' the tastes of friends, family, local community and wider social networks through film screenings. Working with filmmakers, community cinemas are well placed to deliver such audience-building activity, and the BFFS would welcome more explicit recognition by the UK Film Council of this potential.

More broadly, BFFS is concerned that the challenges associated with exhibiting non-mainstream film to specialised and dispersed film audiences throughout the UK are not being sufficiently addressed, nor are opportunities for building informed and broad-minded audiences through non-formal adult education.

BFFS is the only national body whose sole purpose is to develop community exhibition. The 2009 *BFFS National Survey of Community Cinemas* shows that the community exhibitors supported by BFFS 'punch above their weight' in terms of range of films, geographical reach, audience size and appreciation. BFFS advocates that the UK Film Council should offer more support to community cinema, to enable increased outreach into the community. This will develop, sustain and broaden appetite for film and for the educational opportunities it offers, and will bring a measurable increase in the achievement of the UK Film Council's strategic objectives, including 'Improving access to films for UK audiences,' 'Providing opportunities to learn about film,' 'Encouraging innovation for the digital age' and (with reference to the above point about curating film screenings) 'Supporting British films and filmmakers.'

2. Do you agree the UK Film Council has, in the main, delivered against the priorities set out in Film in the Digital Age, our current three-year plan?

The transition to digital for the community sector has been particularly difficult due to lack of capital and low recognition of need – something BFFS has been successful in combating this year, in spite of limited resources. Much work remains in delivering against the UK Film Council's priorities.

BFFS welcomes the DSN, particularly where community exhibitors can share its benefits, typically by auxiliary programming in a commercial or independent venue. Generally, however, access to DCI-compliant equipment is, and will remain, out of the practical reach of most community exhibitors. However, the community exhibition sector is in an ideal position to exploit cost-effective Bluray and DLP technologies, to wide public benefit. BFFS would propose specific UK Film Council support for the sector to enable increased access to such equipment.

BFFS is pleased to see the success of the schools FILMCLUB project, and believes that with increased links to post-school community exhibitors, FILMCLUB participants will be able to continue to enjoy and share the passion for film that the project has inspired.

While the UK Film Council has had undoubted success in encouraging participation and opportunities for learning about film across the UK, a very great deal remains to be done within local communities. BFFS hopes to increase its already significant contribution to this aim with UK Film Council support.

3. Do you agree with our proposed policy priorities for the next period?

Again, the priorities are very much production-focused. However, we are pleased to see that the role of BFFS in 'Improving access to films for UK audiences' is recognised and we look forward to working with the UK Film Council in delivering measurable achievements in this core activity. BFFS has unique experience in harnessing the voluntary effort that is needed to reach dispersed audiences in rural areas, and in socially isolated and deprived urban communities. We believe that additional funds expended in the community cinema sector will deliver value for money several times over.

BFFS would propose an additional priority: greater support for informal adult education in film. BFFS is uniquely placed to become a key education partner in delivering the UK Film Council's Sixth Core Activity: 'Providing opportunities to learn about film'. Community cinemas offer a wealth of opportunities to deliver informal and formal education of this kind, a notably neglected area, to the benefit and enrichment of individuals in all communities. BFFS is actively seeking opportunities to increase activity in this area.

4. Do you agree with our proposed funding priorities for the next period?

BFFS agrees with the principal activities enumerated in 'distribution and exhibition' but is concerned that the £130,000 allocated between the independent and community exhibition support specialists (ICO and BFFS, respectively) is inadequate. BFFS believes that the value-gearing capacity available through its support for community exhibition could be used more fully and that more support would achieve significantly greater impact.

In respect of the Sixth Core Activity – providing opportunities to learn about film – BFFS regrets that none of the UK Film Council's total education budget goes to support adult education in film. A very high proportion of the adult population of the UK has missed out on the experience of film education, and now that adult informal education in film has all but disappeared in the UK, BFFS believes that it is time for the UK Film Council to reconsider its education funding balance, in order to apply its education funding allocation more fairly across communities.

5. Do you agree we have struck a good balance between our international work and our work UK-wide?

No comment, except that BFFS is aware that community exhibitors regard access to international film as important as access to national film.

6. Do you agree our proposals reflect the importance we place on partnerships with the public, private and voluntary sectors?

Greater emphasis should be placed on the potential that the voluntary sector has in expanding access to film, film culture and film education.

7. Do you agree we have struck a good balance between prioritising the economic and cultural aspects of film?

BFFS recognises that this is an enormously complex question with no simple answer. Some sectors of commercial exhibition seem to be in rude health, but in the field of exhibition of specialised film, and of reaching excluded audiences, we feel that while much has been achieved, there is much more to be done. Films that should be finding an audience suffer from unjustifiable neglect, and audiences whose needs are not currently met seek help and support. In many communities commercial film exhibition as it exists today would not be viable, and it is here that an expanded community cinema sector can have a major impact for a relatively low cost.

8. Do you agree with our identification of the risks ahead?

Yes. A key element of their mitigation is to maximize value for money at all levels in all priorities. In exhibition BFFS believes that it has a major part to play in sustainably delivering challenging films to local communities

across the UK, educating and developing audiences in the process – largely through voluntary effort. As a 'key strategic partner' in this endeavour, we are acutely sensitive to the risk of non-delivery. Voluntary effort is itself increasingly difficult to source and manage, and the key to success is to provide support at a realistic level to established and trusted partners with a proven track record of delivery in this area.

9. Do you believe that the UK Film Council's current remit should be extended to cover video games?

BFFS is keen that the UK Film Council's effort is not diluted. Accordingly, we feel that the remit should remain focused on film, film culture and film education in the UK.

10. Do you agree UK Film: Digital innovation and creative excellence has covered all the key areas?

Not entirely. BFFS is surprised that the document does not further address the development of wider community exhibition. Exhibition is a key element in the value chain the UK Film Council seeks to demonstrate to its supporters. Sustainable exhibition – particularly to difficult-to-reach audiences – and the educational opportunities offered are vital to the UK Film Council's mission. Community cinemas can exploit their low running costs, unique audience familiarity and the affordability of cost-effective exhibition equipment to enhance reach and education with the support of economically delivered training and advice. This obvious target has not been emphasised in the UK Film Council's current policy and funding priorities.

BFFS Board
19 January 2010