

Creative England: A Consultation on Strategic Priorities for Film for 2011/12:

Response from Birmingham City Council

Consultation Rationale

Birmingham City Council (BCC) acknowledges Creative England's (CE) rationale in issuing a one year film only consultation at this stage of the organisation's development, given the necessity to allocate Government and Lottery funding specifically intended for film projects during the 2011/2012 financial year. While this is an expedient approach we look forward to the opportunity to contribute to the proposed 'major review of film policy' which is also intended to take place during the year.

However, this consultation sets out some proposed CE organisational arrangements and it is hoped there will be an opportunity to contribute to broader discussions around the strategies and priorities for Creative England itself to ensure there are no missed opportunities. For example; to consider the advantages that might arise from the Creative Scotland (<http://www.creativescotland.com/>) model, which has seen the merger of all public funded bodies (Arts Council/Film/Dance/Writers/Games/etc) into one organisation. This has resulted in a one stop shop with a single voice as well as achieving efficiencies of administration and a reduction of duplication whilst reducing the contribution from the public purse in these hard times.

Do you agree that the strategic priorities are the right ones?

- The Creative England (CE) strategic priorities as outlined in the consultation are based on film activities for 2011/12. Given that film is an important component of the creative media sector as a whole, and to highlight the challenges of convergence across the digital media industries, it is felt that a more coherent long term strategy focused on the digital media sector per se would be helpful to support this restricted document.
- This should be coupled with the development of a long term strategy looking at support for the wider creative industries so that it becomes possible to move away from the awkward focus upon the one medium (film) and bring attention to the varied ways that creative businesses develop and deliver their product.
- Birmingham City Council (BCC) agrees that there should be an emphasis on innovation as a cross cutting theme but this should be given stronger weighting within the main priorities and allocated a set of objectives. This is a sector specific opportunity to look at how we can stimulate innovation; develop new business models, exploit new markets and consider the impact of emerging digital technologies that enable new approaches to content creation, distribution and sharing.

- To maximise the potentials of partnership working, there is a need for a cross cutting theme on how the public sector can work alongside Creative England, both nationally and through the three hubs, to attract and retain talent, secure inward investment and provide relevant education and training.
- There should be a clearer focus on the economic importance of the film sector which has an economic impact locally as well as nationally. The consultation priorities are an uneasy mix of those relating to the development of the creative industries as businesses (talent and inward investment) and the cultural (nurturing a film culture).
- The importance of nurturing a film culture that reaches out and grows new audiences cannot be underestimated. Highlighting this area in the consultation is welcomed and supports the importance of inclusion and diversity in the film industry itself.
- But given the limited resources likely to be available, CE will need to clarify its focus on economic outcomes and business development as opposed to audience development and heritage film archiving.

What comments do you have on the aims and objectives attached to each priority?

1a. Developing creative talent

- The objectives do not make it clear how creative talent is actually going to be developed? De facto there must be links to local government and its educational provision not to mention links to further and higher education providers if home grown talent is to be nurtured, local skills levels raised both of which will benefit the local economy.
- There is no reference to graduate retention or ongoing professional development. The lack of a career path has been recognised by every study that has been compiled on the industry over the last twenty years. What both creative and technical digital media businesses say they would like is more work experience schemes, recognised apprenticeships and defined start-up routes.
- There is the mention of Skillset to support skills and training aligned to the UK's creative industries but it would appear that Skillset will end March 2012. This would seem to present uncertainties that are not conducive to a long term approach. Further clarity is required around this strategic thinking.
- In terms of providing showcases for new young talent there could be an opportunity for CE to play a critical role through a modest grant programme that would encourage appropriate funding applications that exploit digital technologies and social networks (for example) in order to

bring films to a wider audience. This approach has been demonstrated in some of the successful projects initiated by the regional screen agencies and there are other innovative approaches equally deserving to be piloted.

- “Cross Over” opportunities may be best identified by the creative industries themselves but would benefit from events and innovative programmes that foster collaboration. This is about inspiration and facilitation bringing in additional commercial and public funding, such as the Channel Four film funds, 4iP initiative, NESTA, and The Technology Strategy Board amongst others. BCC would have liked to have seen a stronger emphasis upon how CE will act strategically to encourage direct investment in the film sector from non-public sources.
- There are enough courses and bodies out there to help creatives develop their specialist talents as well as their general business skills. The issue here has always been too many diverse providers with a lack of clarity as to what is the best route for a creative to take.
- It may be that CE’s main role in this area is to signpost, co-ordinate, promote and draw attention to opportunities already being successfully provided by other organisations.
- As confirmed above, BCC agrees with the training concept but this should be done in partnership and through other appropriate agencies and educational bodies so as to avoid duplication of resources and cost with CE as an identifier of gaps and an assessor of standards, but not as a direct provider; although there may be a role as a commissioner in some areas.
- The Creative Choices web site - <http://www.creative-choices.co.uk/> is an example of this “co-ordination” and “signposting” role.

1b. Bringing Creative Talent to the Marketplace

- Regional Screen Agencies (RSAs) have had a mixed track record regarding financing commercially viable films that generate a positive financial return. This is partly due to the difficult balancing act of supporting good ideas that are then credibly realised, develop talent and have the diversity that appeals to new audiences, with the need to work within the commercial realities of the marketplace. It has to be accepted that in general terms finding the finance to make any film is difficult, even for the commercial sector.
- CE should continue to support the financing of the making of commercial films; however this funding should be based upon the use of accepted commercial investment criteria such as looking at returns on capital invested.

- Consideration needs to be given to how CE supports creative talent by identifying and developing an infrastructure that will help creative film makers to access commercial or private sector funding for films that are likely to be shown outside the mainstream cinema venues, including digital and online distribution. This will require working with educational partners to make sure there are training opportunities for creatives in commercial funding techniques – negotiation, marketing and business finance.
- There is no shortage of raw creative talent but it needs to be shaped and supported with the right level of finance and business infrastructure until it is mature enough to operate in the commercial world of film making. CE needs to be clear about how this is to be achieved.

2. Nurturing film culture

- Pilots such as ‘Rural Cinema’ suggest there are a number of delivery model options that should be pursued with equal enthusiasm as it is unlikely there is a one-size-fits-all solution. For instance the Love Films School Scheme could easily be applied to village halls. Also the continual arrival of viable new hardware and software in the marketplace should be considered so that, for example, the ability to stream any film via the web direct to screens in any location is pointed towards making unfamiliar work more accessible. This is a matter of targeted audience marketing rather than infrastructure.
- Indeed there is no mention in the objectives about broadening and reaching new audiences, particularly young audiences, through the use of emerging technologies and new approaches to digital distribution of content (eg. easily accessed video sites, on demand point to point screenings, mobile technologies).
- It may be therefore that audience and heritage development should not be an explicit role for CE but a shared responsibility to include other agencies and funders who are better placed to deliver cultural and social outcomes. This would allow CE to focus on selective specific priorities

3. Helping to maximise inward investment

- There is little mention of the digital infrastructure (superfast broadband speeds) that increasingly will be required to reach audiences and which will therefore contribute to the future growth of other cultural / creatives sectors, particularly those involved in content creation. It is an effective fit for purpose digital infrastructure that will enable collaboration and innovation.
- Therefore there is an urgent requirement to provide the right infrastructure (connectivity) to support the film and digital media sector

and enable collaboration and business growth in a converging global digital economy. Satisfying the growing demand for capacity and realising the benefits of superfast connectivity is essential to develop the sustainable long term future of film and other creative digital media businesses.

- It is not clear how CE will ensure Lottery investment has an even “greater impact for local communities and national partners across the Regions.” (Ref 3.4.7) especially given that the partnerships outlined are focused at a national level. This seems to indicate less involvement at local level and is in direct contrast to the RSA activities that proved particularly effective at that level. How will national and regional inward investment priorities and strategies link to our local priorities?
- The provision of a one-stop production liaison service across the country is welcomed as a positive building block but there lacks clarity on how this coordinated service across the three hubs will be achieved. What impact will this have on Film Birmingham and its role? How will this accommodate increasingly important local inward investment priorities and strategies? How will this ensure there are job opportunities for skilled local production talent and technical crews? How will a centralised film location service work with the CE Hubs and how will the hubs work with local authorities who will be important in facilitating ‘on location’ filming?
- The Hubs must ensure that they do not have a negative outcome for cities that already provide a good economically viable service.
- Extreme caution should be used so that any new arrangement does not act to the detriment of effective existing local arrangements like Film Birmingham. Before any “absorption” goes ahead a clear proposal outlining how the service delivery mechanism that would replace local film offices will operate is essential.

How can Creative England best build upon the work of the Regional Screen Agencies in supporting these priorities?

- CE can ensure a continued focus on nurturing local talent and local creative media industries as these are the building blocks to achieve a thriving national film industry
- Develop plans to contribute to the national strategy that is encouraging inward investment for local areas.
- Creative Digital Media industries, which include film, have been identified as potential high growth sectors. They are very visible businesses and are seen to add value across other business sectors. These are potentially strong voices that can encourage inward investment in local areas/regions and this potential is an asset to any CE strategy.

- Ensure that CE through the hubs works collaboratively with the local authority and established local partnerships (LEPs, Business Led Cluster Groups, further and higher education) to harness capability that already exists in the regions rather than working in parallel but separate tracks e.g. utilisation of skills that have been developed by the Library of Birmingham around archiving.
- In addition to the national partnerships outlined in the consultation document, CE itself should look at how it develops partnerships and maximises value at local and regional levels that consolidate the positive achievements made by the RSAs.
- Consideration should be given to some form of specialisation being given to each hub on a national basis which builds upon local expertise.

What are the key challenges, in addition to funding?

- The CE centralised model needs to ensure that it continues to be well connected to the centre of local delivery. A criticism of the RSAs in the past has been that they were effective at a local level but not at a national level. This model appears to have swung to the opposite extreme where the partner engagement appears to be very strong at a national level but lacks obvious local connections. All leadership appears to come from the centre and that does not enable strategic direction to be achieved locally in line with agreed national priorities. It is not clear where the decisions will be made and how much autonomy the hubs will have in growing their 'regional' digital media industries?
- There is a need for clear governance arrangements for CE and its hubs; with performance accountability to be in place to reflect local circumstances to ensure transparency and value for money.

How can Creative England best ensure that these priorities are delivered in a way that meets the needs of all the English Regions?

- On going relationship building and partnership working with local & strategic partners e.g. local LEPs WM Business Cluster Group (digital media cluster), Digital Birmingham and Birmingham Science City amongst others is essential for CE to achieve any credible results.
- By raising the visibility and profile of creative digital media activities across England that will serve to demonstrate the sectors' economic and societal value.

Other comments

Birmingham and the region 'punches above their weight' in terms of successes and achievements in the creative industries sector. However the Annex information Section 6 "Where will the hubs be?" Limited information appears to have been provided for the 'Why Birmingham' compared to the 'Why Manchester?' and 'Why Bristol?' BCC would be happy to work with CE to revise the text so that it more accurately reflects the achievements and strengths of its creative media industries.