

Bringing cinema to rural communities: the UK Film Council's Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme

Introduction

The UK Film Council's rural strategy is led by the Distribution and Exhibition (D&E) Department. The objective for the strategy is to bring the cinema experience to rural areas.

D&E has funded a number of projects across the UK to give more people the opportunity to enjoy film, including through the world's first Digital Screen Network, cinema access programmes, distribution (Prints & Advertising) funding and other capital funding schemes.

However, the UK Film Council believes more can be done for communities that are outside the major metropolitan areas and has been working to develop a specific plan for rural cinema. The UK Film Council has allocated £1.2 million of Lottery funding towards a Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme.

The UK Film Council in partnership with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) researched rural cinema provision across England which revealed sizeable areas with limited access to cinema. Looking at this research, which analysed population density and geographical reach in rural areas, together with existing data on cinema provision, the UK Film Council has selected the following three areas in which to rollout its Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme:

- Shropshire;
- Wiltshire (plus the adjoining Test Valley Local Authority); and
- North Yorkshire.

Research and consultation

After taking into account the DEFRA research, UK Film Council then commissioned an in-depth study into each of the above areas from Inglis Todd Consultancy to audit current film exhibition provision and the public funding landscape, look at the social and economic aspects of each area and to make recommendations on required strategic intervention. This consisted of both desk and field-based research, along with interviews with key constituents.

The recommendations were discussed at a meeting in London on 16 December 2008 with 24 participants from rural cinemas, film societies, touring networks, national and regional bodies and public funders.

The D&E Senior Executive also visited each area to discuss rural cinema provision with interested parties.

The challenges: content, presentation and digital projection equipment

The purpose of the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme is to enhance and develop rural cinema, ie to bring the cinema experience to rural areas. Rural cinema in this sense means film screenings in rural areas, normally in non-traditional venues such as village and town halls, arts centres and other community spaces. It encompasses film societies, film clubs, mobile cinemas and community cinemas.

The aim is to give more audiences in rural areas the opportunity to see new releases as part of a public audience through a certain standard of presentation, ie with high quality sound and pictures.

The research undertaken for the UK Film Council revealed two inter-related issues – quality of presentation and supply of content – to be the two biggest challenges facing rural cinema providers.

Currently the majority of rural exhibitors are reliant on DVD-based systems to source and show films. Whilst satisfactory presentation is possible through high level DVD-based equipment, advances in digital technology offer significant scope for improvement on this front. Furthermore, owing to industry standards of technology and release patterns for films, rural cinemas usually cannot screen a newly released film until 12–16 weeks after the start of the theatrical release in metropolitan or larger cinemas, or sometimes until the DVD of the film becomes available to buy. Uptake of new digital projection technology is therefore crucial if these issues are to be overcome. The UK Film Council has therefore determined that the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme should be used primarily to fund a combination of equipment.

Core to overcoming these challenges is the adoption of the Digital Cinema Initiative (DCI) standard. DCI is a film industry initiative for digital cinema that ensures a uniform and high level of technical performance, reliability and quality control, as

well as advanced content security. These specifications have been universally accepted by the industry as the standard for digital cinema. UK distributors will typically only supply digital films – including 3D digital films – if DCI specifications are in place. Information about the DCI standard is available in the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme guidelines.

DCI equipment, however, is significantly more expensive than other digital equipment. The cost may be prohibitive for some smaller cinemas seeking to upgrade. For this reason, the UK Film Council will use the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme to implement a newly available touring version of the DCI specification projector. The equipment will serve multiple venues within a region, delivering maximum value for money.

The UK Film Council will also provide support for Blu-Ray-based digital projection equipment which will represent a significant step-up in quality to DVD-based systems currently used. Whilst this equipment will not provide the same levels of presentation as DCI, nor is it likely to facilitate the screenings of new releases, it will still allow the presentation of older releases and other content at a high level of quality. The system is cheaper than the industry standard equipment and can be portable or fixed in a single venue.

This combination of equipment will give rural operators flexibility and enable them to test different methods for improving presentation and content supply.

The UK Film Council also recognises that this is a time when the cinema experience is rapidly evolving due to advances in digital technology. Digital 3D has made a major impact on the exhibition business with digital 3D releases proving highly popular with audiences prepared to pay premium ticket prices for the 3D experience. Live broadcasts of opera, sport and music are more frequently programmed in metropolitan venues and audience interviews with filmmakers can be transmitted from one cinema to many others.

For these reasons, digital 3D and satellite installations will also form part of the equipment specification for the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme so that rural venues also can benefit from these exciting technological developments.

The Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme – structure and approach

The Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme will introduce a rollout of these new digital technologies into the three pilot areas to significantly improve quality of presentation and the supply and range of content screened.

Each of the three pilot areas has its own particular characteristics, (eg geographic, population density) and is at a different stage of development from a cinema perspective. The research also revealed a broad range of challenges facing rural cinema practitioners, including marketing and advocacy issues, difficulty in achieving sustainability and other financial challenges. It was clear that there are significant operational and structural differences between different types of rural cinema practitioners, such as established touring set-ups, individual film societies, rural arts centres and local festivals. These factors mean that a 'one size fits all' approach is undesirable.

Consequently, the UK Film Council has decided that any scheme needs to have the flexibility to accommodate regional differences in infrastructure and approach.

In each of the three areas, the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme will provide funding to a single organisation that represents a consortium of parties in each specific area that are active in rural cinema. That organisation would be required to purchase a combination of the equipment referred to above and make it available as widely as possible across the area.

Such organisations would also be expected to use the award to carry out audience development work, training and other activities to ensure that the technology is maximised and that it benefits the largest number of people.

The UK Film Council will produce guidelines for application to the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme.

Monitoring and knowledge sharing

As a pilot scheme or test-bed, it is vital that knowledge, data and good practice is captured at every stage of the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme. It is also important that this information is made transparent to all of the participants and interested parties to improve good practice and unify the three areas on a strategic level. This on-going monitoring process will be supplemented by in-depth reports, the first

produced 12 months after the pilot scheme goes live. There will be a consistent approach to monitoring and reporting across the three pilot areas.

Success of the strategy

The monitoring data will inform the UK Film Council as to the success of the Rural Cinema Pilot Scheme. Data will be shared for the benefit of all stakeholders and other interested parties, and will provide the foundations of any future national or UK-wide scheme.