

Future of the Media Commission

Northern Ireland Screen Submission 21/01/21

Introduction

Northern Ireland Screen is the national screen agency for Northern Ireland. We are committed to maximising the economic, cultural and educational value of the screen industries for the benefit of Northern Ireland.

This goal is pursued through our mission to accelerate the development of a dynamic and sustainable screen industry and culture in Northern Ireland.

Commission Terms

While we are conscious of the limitations of our standing in this consultation, we would make two comments on the scope and focus of the Commission's work:

1. While we are aware that this issue is addressed within other public policy initiatives, we would question whether the importance of Public Service Content in projecting the Republic of Ireland's culture abroad is sufficiently prioritised within the terms and goals presented. The export of quality Irish content is a very powerful soft diplomacy tool for Ireland while the revenues associated with that exported content can make a significant contribution to the overall sustainability of the content sector¹.
2. We hope that the Commission will consider the unique situation that exists in relation to Northern Ireland and the importance of ensuring that Northern Ireland is reflected within the Republic of Ireland's Public Service Content landscape and that the frameworks underpinning that Public Service Content landscape support the need to include Northern Ireland within its scope².

Partnerships with Irish Public Service Broadcasters/Public Service Content

Northern Ireland Screen has worked extensively and collaborated successfully with all four of the key Public Service Content supporters in the Republic of Ireland – RTÉ, Screen Ireland, BAI's Sound and Vision Fund and TG4.

Northern Ireland Screen supports the local independent production sector through funding development and production of a wide range of content for broadcast and/or distribution, with a significant amount of that content broadcast on Irish PSBs RTÉ and TG4.

At the new talent level, schemes like RTÉ's Storyland are vital to building the credibility of short filmmakers moving them into longer form film and television drama projects. Currently Storyland is the only new talent production scheme for television drama in the UK and Ireland and it is vital that it is protected. Other new talent schemes that the ILBF is partnering with TG4 on include Glúin Nua, a digital short form mentoring scheme and Scéal Úr, a drama development scheme for new Irish speaking writers.

¹ The outstanding work of Cartoon Saloon an obvious and live example.

² The recent government commitment to funding for Northern Ireland Screen's Irish Language Broadcast Fund an example, based predominantly on the long established collaboration between the ILBF and TG4.



We also work in successful partnerships with both Screen Ireland and the BAI's Sound and Vision schemes as we recognise the value in collaborative partnerships in the further development of the sector on an all-island basis.

Many Northern Ireland Screen projects have benefitted from support through both the BAI's Sound and Vision Scheme and from Screen Ireland. Both of these bodies often prove crucial in the development and production of ambitious projects for Irish PSBs and again we would welcome sustained and increased funding as both are heavily oversubscribed. BAI's Sound and Vision scheme has a 25% Irish language quota which we welcome and would hope to see maintained if not increased. We would also welcome a similar quota for Irish language projects at Screen Ireland.

The availability of a number of contestable funds within the Republic of Ireland is a key strength to the ecosystem with the most compelling, far reaching and long-lasting content produced in the Republic of Ireland likely to have been supported by them. From a Northern perspective, Screen Ireland's patronage of directors Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn in the production of *Good Vibrations* and *Ordinary Love* is a strong example, while the BAI's Sound & Vision Fund supporting Steve McQueen's *Hunger* is an example of important content with longevity. However, it is worth noting that these contestable funds are heavily oversubscribed and could certainly deliver considerably more Public Service value with increased funding.

For our Irish Language Broadcast Fund, TG4 is the primary broadcast partner. For the ILBF to continue to maintain supporting the local sector to produce Irish language content, it is vital that TG4, as the primary platform for this content, receives increased and sustained funding.

We recognise that our local audiences need a wider variety of Irish language content, particularly in areas such as children's content, animation and drama, areas which require significantly more financial investment. Indeed, the same is true for all content we support for Irish PSBs, with a dearth of funding available for original animation, drama, children's content, high-end factual entertainment series and feature documentaries. Increased investment would increase the viewing choices for Irish audiences and would raise the production values of all content, thus further benefitting the audience it seeks to serve.

We would welcome the opportunity to be able to support projects like *Sol*, an original animation feature for TG4, S4C and BBC Alba which was supported by Northern Ireland Screen through our Screen and Irish Language Broadcast Funds with the majority of funding coming from the British Film Institute's Young Audience Content Fund. This type of collaboration provides greater opportunities for small more culturally focussed projects like *Sol* to flourish while building up the credibility of creative teams to deliver larger more international focussed projects.

Another hugely successful all-Ireland funded project was *Rocky Ros Muc*, a feature documentary that was funded by our Irish Language Broadcast Fund for TG4 and also received funding from both the BAI's Sound and Vision Scheme and Screen Ireland. The film became the first feature documentary in the Irish language to be considered for an Oscar.

Prominence and Visibility

The prominence and visibility of PSBs can be prohibitive for audiences, particularly at a time when audiences are consuming content through a variety of ways and a myriad of devices and we would



support Irish PSB channels' bid to ensure prominence on the Irish EPG and across all user interfaces. We are already backing TG4's bid to be given the currently vacant Channel 8 on Freeview boxes in Northern Ireland.

Heritage & Archive

Northern Ireland Screen is also partnering with the BAI on archive projects through our Digital Film Archive, a partnership which has a vital role in preserving and celebrating our rich cultural heritage.

Governance and regulation

We are not well placed to comment on this critical issue. Our only comment is that we see the increased role of OFCOM in the governance of the BBC in the UK to have delivered a greater clarity in relation to quota regulation and public purposes in general.