

MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING: 18th March 2025

11am, Tuesday 18th March 2025

Studio Ulster, 9 Gullivers Drive, Belfast

Present: David Sterling (Chair), Roise Ní Bhaoill, Carmel Mullan, Mark Huffam, Fionnuala Deane, Michael Fanning, Peter Weil, Tom Gray, Susan Picken, Meg Earls, Ciara Chambers, Eimhear O'Neill, Aaron Donaghey, Frank Ferguson, Tommy Martin, Bríd Ní Fhachtna, Murat Akser, Dermot Lavery

In attendance: Richard Williams (CEO), Andrew Reid (Chief Content Officer), Áine Walsh (Head of ILBF), Mary McVey (Head of Marketing), Francis Jones (Archive Manager), David McConnell (Head of Education), Bernard McCloskey (Head of Exhibition), Laura Higgins (Head of Finance), Nicola Lyons (Head of Production), Suzanne Harrison (Head of Funding), Marie Shivers (PA to CEO)

Apologies: None

No conflicts of interest were noted.

1.0 Minutes of the Board meeting of 10th December 2024

1.1 The Board was content with the minutes, and they were signed.

1.2 All actions have been addressed. No matters arising.

2.0 Chair's business

2.1 The Chair welcomed the new Board members (shadowing the present Board until their terms of appointment commence) and noted that while it was unfortunate that the DfE Minister was unable to meet the Board today, he is hopeful this will happen in due course. Committees will be allocated to new members and an introductory one to one meeting will be arranged in due course. An independent Board Effectiveness review will be carried out this year and as we are entering the final year of our 4 year strategy it will shortly be time to begin development of the new strategy with Board contribution in this process. Exceptional achievements have been attained over last 4 years, most recently with two hugely successful events: the CINE celebration event and the 20th Anniversary of the ILBF. CINE also won a recent EDI award.

3.0 CEO's Report including Performance Indicator Report and Investment Report

3.1 Noted concern that the DfE funding was not sufficient to delivery the full strategy outcomes; that the Oscar Wilde event in LA in March was a great success alongside the CINE and ILBF events. Sector wise it is mostly good news although areas of challenge remain in large-scale due to a shortage of projects and the need to fill studios requiring constant focus, and interactive due to the downturn in publishing companies investing in games. The exit of our Interactive Manager also makes things more difficult. A large amount of work reshaping our Archive Department continues.

KPI Chart

- 3.3 Apart from 2 reds everything is green or amber and on track. 8:1 ratio for economic return is good news in challenging circumstances with the strikes and market uncertainty. This will be reflected in mid-term evaluation. A lot of work on sustainability is underway with a number of successes. The new and emerging talent target of 300 was too ambitious, although 230 is still not far off hitting target. Education targets work on a different calendar so updates provided are until end December 24 only with a further update going into June. Exhibition and archive figures are strong, and the few KPIs that are amber are only marginally under. USBF trainee retention is red due to limited placement opportunities.

Investment Report

- 3.4 The Investment Report captures the range and scale of what we support.

Indicative Strategy Development Timeline

- 3.5 This process is the biggest opportunity to shape what we do particularly in relation to the industry. The process should take around a year, with the DfE Minister signing off the strategy and needs to be in place before April 2026. DfC provision is smaller but covers many critical aspects and we hope to have the DfC commitment to our new strategy in a similar and parallel form to our DfE commitment. Engagement from Board members outside of the Board meetings will be needed - knowledge of the sectors, sense checking our thoughts in terms of sectoral groups, innovation/AI, budget allocation etc.

Draft Business Plan

- 3.6 This Business Plan is for the final year of the strategy. Summary of key points of focus ends with strategy development. Launch of Studio Ulster is a key focus for the next year. The Strategy forecast document which sits alongside the business plan illustrates our appetite for an additional £4 million funding for 25-26 with an additional £2 million the minimum required to ensure steady state commitment to all our sectors. We are disappointed that capital funding from DfC hasn't come through but it is being built into the model for this year.
- 3.7 The squeeze on our budget is driven by 4 factors – a reduced allocation from DfE, substantial carryover commitments resulting from our previous successes, the considerable growth in demand across tv drama and independent film and the need to prioritise Large Scale production.
- 3.8 Whether the Business Plan is strong enough as a selling document was discussed. It was agreed we would consider this outside of the Business Plan which is predominantly an administrative document.
- 3.9 The Board approved the Business Plan 25/26.

4.0 Finance, Audit and Governance

Risk Register

- 4.1 Three primary risks have been elevated: two are financial around potential budget cuts from DfE and DfC. The proposed DfE budget is not sufficient to cover requirements for the final year of the strategy. There is no indication of a confirmed budget from DfC and we have

been advised that capital funding will form a separate bid which will have a significant impact on our education provision. The third is around the downturn in the interactive sector with publishers not having funds available and several companies struggling as a result. There is no automatic solution and we are helping where we can.

- 4.2 Reduction in risks for: CINE as the business case for an extension to funding has been agreed; TV drama, Fact/Ent and Animation now that strong pipelines are in place; new tax credit expenditure as companies are becoming more familiar with the way the new system works; and Board recruitment due to the recent cohort of nine new members.
- 4.3 Three new risks have been added around the installation of new online management systems. While tight controls are in place risk is involved due to them being new systems.
- 4.4 The Risk Register was agreed by the Board.

Audit and Risk Committee Update

- 4.5 A number of internal audit reviews completed this year. Next will look at Payroll, HR, and restructuring. External audit consolidation of accounts by the end of April and will bring to the Board in June for approval. New regulations around corporate governance very useful, especially for the new members. Marie will circulate.

DfE Assurance Statement

- 4.6 Good communication with Department around non-compliance points. We are liaising with departmental colleagues for good practice on Cyber Security and have produced a draft to review. We have also set up a Cyber Incident Response Team and a scenario exercise will be undertaken shortly. We have recently recruited a finance procurement lead and procurement training is constantly undertaken.
- 4.7 The Assurance Statement was approved by the Board.

Management Accounts

- 4.8 Whilst there is £3m to be cashflowed in March across Screen Fund this is a relatively standard position at this time of year and everything is on track for full spend with most funds ahead of anticipated levels. This is the final year of the Lottery programme with indications that funding should remain at the £125k level for the next 2 years – we await final confirmation of this. The CINE business case has been approved to primarily utilise recoupment to plug the funding gap for 2025/26. £600,000 recoupment has been received with permission to retain £650,000. This should cover the majority of CINE expenditure with any excess to be used for additional cashflow in the Screen Fund.
- 4.9 Working towards April deadline for accounts. With no interim audit to focus on we should meet this deadline. New finance system is working well, and payroll now coming in house which will be cost saving and give us more control to manage it properly.
- 4.10 It is hard to predict if the level of recoupment will continue to increase but we keep it under constant review. The Department allow us to retain recoupment. There is a need to constantly manage expectation around recoupment and to remind stakeholders that the purpose of our funding is its economic leverage, job creation and sectoral sustainability with recoupment an added bonus in certain circumstances. We are always cautious about focussing too much on recoupment. Auditors look at this area often and there is often

pressure to recalibrate the focus on recoupment with significant danger of unintended consequences. A lot of funding goes out in grant form with no recoupment position. Previous years recoupment has been reinvested in the Screen Fund, this year it will be going to CINE in entirety.

4.11 The Board agreed the Management Accounts.

Direct Award Contracts

4.12 One DAC for a Gamescom event. CPD deemed it low risk and awarded the DAC accordingly.

Strategic Resources Committee Update

4.13 All issues discussed have been covered already. No further business.

5.0 Marketing Update

5.1 A busy start to the year with the successful CINE event featuring John Stevenson, director of Kung Fu Panda, and the ILBF 20th anniversary event. Northern Ireland Screen hosted the NI leg of the BFC US TV familiarisation trip this weekend, with Legendary and Paramount involved. FM/dFM and DfE Minister set visit took place this morning. The annual London Showcase event at BAFTA will take place in April which will show one of our new talent feature films as well as a selection of short films. A W5/Paper Owl launch event for the Puffin Rock experience is planned for the end of March, and a release date and subsequent gala screening for How to Train Your Dragon is imminent.

6.0 Other Committee Updates

Investment Cte

6.1 Recent projects awarded at Committee include Captain Onion, a children's/animation project, Series 2 of Li Ban, a children's animated series for TG4 sold internationally for Aardman, and a Natalie Cassidy series for BBC Daytime. Unfortunately, the Kickboxer project is no longer happening in Northern Ireland.

ILBF

6.2 Well attended 20th anniversary event with the DG of TG4, Máire Bhreathnach from Below the Radar as well as a former ILBF trainee on a panel. The former trainee, Damian McCann, just recently directed two drama features and noted that he was able to make those films with people who had been trained by ILBF. Kneecap director Rich Peppiatt also took part and spoke about how the film had changed attitudes towards the Irish Language, especially in the US. Celebrations will continue throughout the year. Training is progressing well and on track. The ILBF is involved in a new training scheme with TG4 and Fís Éireann, Spreag is aimed at identifying and supporting new talent in Irish language animation. Three nominations in RTS Ireland, for Lí Ban, the animated series; Ó Chív go Corcaigh, a documentary on Nadia Dobrianska who moved from war-torn Ukraine to Ireland with her family and a nomination also for drama series Crá. Crá is also nominated at this year's Celtic Media Festival, alongside Kneecap, which has two nominations including Spirit of the Festival, also nominations for the documentary on the Bothy Band and radio series Saol na mBan.

SECWG

- 6.3 The Economic Appraisal report has been received and awaiting sign off. Capital provision for delivery is needed across the board. Response submitted to the Dept of Education Curriculum Review in terms of our engagement. Decision required on how we can support the Dept of Education Shared Island programme. Aspire shared education Peace Plus programme. We have presented to Dept of Education on what we can offer to the Shared Education PeacePlus programme. The BFI showcase takes place in Derry in March with the Nerve Centre. Industrial action is likely, we need to be conscious about this and how we support teachers. OECD highlighted our work and the inclusive nature of our programming.

Heritage and Archive WG

- 6.4 Two items in CEO's report to note - Northern Ireland Now project, a contemporary archive project lasting 18 months has just wrapped. It successfully engaged with a wide range of audiences and communities focusing on those hardest to reach and most under-represented. Seeing the response from participants was heartening and we are proud to see this content added to the archive. We have applied to BFI for continuation of this funding. Belfast Stories are also interested and have pledged funding. AI in the context of screen archives is an interesting area. There are challenges involved with a huge backlog of content that we haven't been able to make publicly available so are interested in how AI can help in this area. A modest pilot programme developing programme summaries using AI has just concluded with promising results.

CEFFWG

- 6.5 It is disheartening that the funding situation remains the same continuously. The Committee is consistently blown away with what the organisations do with the funding they have and hope that one day the funding situation will change. The recent closure of Connswater has rendered The Strand pop up space homeless. Susan asked if there was an update to the development of the business case for Belfast Stories. The CEO confirmed that it is delivered by Belfast City Council/Tourism NI and is expected in April. There should be more visibility of this at the June or September meeting and it would be beneficial for new Board members to undertake a site visit.

Skills/Training

- 6.6 Funding for CINE has been secured for a further year after which we will seek to merge some of CINE into our core skills programme. There is a temporary change in staffing for Skills Cluster with Chloe McAdam taking over from Tory Killen. Currently the skills team have a huge job looking after our 111 trainees.

USBF

- 6.7 The USBF has a relatively smaller budget but there is a high demand for the projects with the BBC commissioning round taking most of the budget. Most notable thing to mention is that Ulster-Scots has a strong relationship with the creation of the United States, the Declaration of Independence in the US is next year. We will support a digital portal to link up with other activities that are happening, collaborating with PRONI and other stakeholders.

7.0 Any Other Business

- 7.1 It was noted that office facilities in Belfast seem dated - first impressions to think about. The CEO will speak to everyone about Committee allocation which will be confirmed offline instead of waiting until the June Board meeting.

8.0 Date of Next Meeting

- 8.1 The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 11am on Tuesday 24th June 2025.

Actions

Point	Detail	Actioned by	Update
4.5	Circulate new regulations around corporate governance	Marie Shivers	Completed
6.5	Explore potential Belfast Stories site visit for new Board members	CEO	Arrange for autumn
7.1	Inform new Board members of Committee allocation	CEO	Completed

Signed: _____



Date: _____

24/6/25