

Rebuilding the TV Industry in the West Midlands

WHAT DO WE NEED?

TV Strategy Group July 2010

Our aim is to develop a co-ordinated strategy to enable quality TV drama to emerge from the Midlands (homegrown productions) and to take place in the Midlands (incoming productions).

We've split this into three stages:

STAGE 1: Identifying needs (Mar-Sept 2010)

STAGE 2: Looking at how we can address these needs, leading to a strategy document (Sept-Dec 2010).

STAGE 3: Promoting/campaigning for our strategy to be implemented (Jan 2011 -).

Responses/Ideas to info@producersforum.org.uk
(Please put TV STRATEGY in the subject line)

STAGE 1: Identifying needs

This document examines our region's needs in terms of:

- what we currently lack; and
- what is in place now but could be further exploited.

CONTEXT

This document was drawn up by the TV Strategy Group in response to the public event, 'Rebuilding the TV Industry in the West Midlands', which took place in Birmingham in March 2010.

A website was set up as a result of this event:

<http://midlandstv drama.blogspot.com> where comments have been posted.

A sector-led TV Strategy Group was set up following the event, comprising representatives of the Screenwriters Forum, the Producers Forum, Screen WM, Equity, BBC, as well as local producers, script editor, and other professionals working in the industry. The group met in June 2010 to discuss Stage 1 (Needs), with written statements submitted by those unable to attend.

The inputs from those sources have been drawn together into this consultation paper by the Screenwriters Forum.

This document is a snapshot of 'where we are' from the point of view of participating industry professionals, and therefore may not be definitive.

It is intended **to identify needs, to raise issues and to promote discussion** in order that we can move to Stage 2 (How to address the needs).

We welcome your ideas for addressing these needs in this tough financial climate

(contact details on front cover)

WRITERS: Creating great drama

We lack regional 'show-runner' figures or major league writer-mentors (like Russell T, Jimmy McGovern etc) to inspire/nurture/campaign for regional writers.

There is very limited funding for TV script development from Screen WM or anyone else. It is not easy to access.

There are few opportunities or processes to help idea/script development. e.g. there's no tradition of rehearsed readings for TV scripts/screenplays here (despite a strong tradition of this in theatre).

A handful of TV script editors are based in the region but they have limited links with screenwriters so far.

Only limited links exist between regional actors, directors and writers.

Writers don't know which regional producers are interested in TV or their preferred formats.

There are existing schemes/opportunities for 'Northern' writers (eg run by BBC in Manchester) but not for the Midlands.

Incoming productions offer few opportunities for writers as scripts are already written/commissioned. Subsequent workshops are v useful but is there more that can be gained for writers from these ventures?

We need quickly accessible go-and-see money available from Screen WM or elsewhere for conferences/short training eg for London Screenwriters Festival.

There are few masterclasses on offer in the region – training courses tend to target a wide range of experience.
Do established writers prioritise their own Continuing Professional Development?

Are screenwriters listed in regional databases of talent? More self-promotion/marketing is required.

We have limited skills in writing/creating online drama.
There are no links with the burgeoning regional games industry – yet scriptwriters are regularly needed.

Existing schemes could be further exploited,

- eg Digishorts was primarily a director's scheme yet it could also have been a great opportunity for writers - and stronger scripts could transform final films. Is collaboration with experienced producers/writers encouraged at an early enough stage in these director-led schemes?

- there is no follow-up on Lottery Script Grants – what's the next step for the project and writer? What more does the project require? Can they be introduced to relevant people, can they be progressed in some way?

BBC *Doctors* is a great asset to the region. However few regional writers write regularly for the series. Could a regional flavour benefit the series and also provide more experience/work for regional screenwriters? Do *Landgirls* and other potential new productions target/value regional writers?

There are few links between regional screenwriters and BBC regional staff to allow a flow of ideas – can this be improved? Is there a way to bypass the Writers Room?

BBC have a focus on new talent from ethnic minorities – how is this working and can it be expanded?

The Screenwriters' Forum provides useful networking but is there room for more collaboration/support in terms of assisting each other in idea/script development?

ACTORS/DIRECTORS: Creating great drama

There is a lack of awareness of incoming work/opportunities in the region. Information must be passed on as widely and as early as possible.

The Central England Equity branch alerts its members to any paid acting work but this facility is generally only used by theatre companies.

There is a lack of contact with writers/producers. More networking is needed, more collaboration should be encouraged.

Directors would benefit from being listed in a comprehensive, accessible database which producers actually use.

Directors need the chance to develop a directing CV, i.e. move from small 'own grown' projects, to funded shorts, and then to directing for continuing dramas. What regional routes are there?

A closer, more joined-up relationship is needed between actors and Midlands film-makers. The issues are the same - an unfounded perception that there isn't the skill and talent base here. But unfortunately for actors, this perception often extends to Midlands film-makers who will use local actors for their own 'no budget' projects but will look to London or Manchester once they get funded. Of course, directors/producers sometimes feel the need to get a 'name' to get a film in a festival or to the attention of someone influential but there are usually other roles that can be cast regionally (and there are 'names' in the region too).

Actors tend to be in Spotlight, and Equity is developing a regional database on its website. But there is a wealth of under-used talent from across the Midlands – Equity has around 4500 members in the region, ranging from actors, directors, dancers, stage managers etc - many of whom regularly travel elsewhere to find work in the industry.

There are no Midlands-based TV casting directors. At the moment Midland-based actors are not seen in the same way as actors based in Manchester and London are, and therefore miss out on that early rung to do the small roles, which lead to the bigger ones. As most casting is done in London, London actors are usually cast (casting directors say they can't in all conscience ask actors to pay upwards of £80 to get a train at the last minute to a casting which may only pay £300 if they get it the part).

There was a recent 'general audition' for BBC Doctors at the MAC. Is there a way for regular auditions/casting in the region to become profitable for the BBC?

The Midlands is a large region boasting a huge number of talented actors. If regional actors were used more often, wouldn't the BBC save on subsistence costs/travel expenses?

Actors and directors lack opportunities to take part in script development. Script's recent schemes are useful and could be built upon.

PRODUCERS: Producing great drama

Our region has many small independents with short-film producing experience but limited experience/skills/confidence in TV drama.

There are no large drama indies (like Red) here to inspire/share resources with/cross-fertilise with smaller indies.

We have few experienced TV producers in our region, hence mentoring/skill sharing is difficult

Creative/development producing skills for TV drama – are these sufficiently widespread? Can they be improved/shared? How can confidence be increased?

There's very limited funding for TV script development from Screen WM or anyone else. Funding is tricky to access.

Producers need more industry contacts – they need access to drama commissioners and early information about what they're looking for. Since some regional producers do have links, can these be exploited/shared more effectively?

There's a lack of awareness of/links with talent and other professionals in the region.

Maverick and Hotbed have tried drama in the past – are there further TV drama opportunities with these production companies?

Which producers, if any, have experience of online drama?

PRODUCTION: Making great drama

We lack a comprehensive database of crew in the region – hence it is all too easy for incoming productions to bring their own crew.

Early and widespread notification of upcoming productions and work opportunities for crew is essential.

Poor links exist between Heads of Department (HODs) and crew in this/neighbouring regions (since HODs tend to pick their own team, they need to know who has particular skills in the region/nearby).

We have a skills gap – eg HODs, script supervisors, location managers, etc

We lack an adequate Production Base – no dedicated studio space, insufficient production offices for hire with parking facilities etc.

We lack a Facilities House like Take Two in Manchester/London or ProVision in Manchester/Leeds.

Post-production facilities are available – but are they well known outside the region? Is there sufficient capacity?

SCREEN WM: Supporting our TV industry

Screen WM's remit does include broadcast (inc. drama) although it is not mandated to do so by another body (unlike film, for example, with the UK Film Council). Screen WM says it recognises the importance of TV production, and drama specifically, but it is working with limited resources.

Screen WM needs a comprehensive, up-to-date database/directory of professionals and talent in the region, which is easily accessed by producers/production companies. This needs to be actively promoted inside and outside the region.

The agency needs to provide early and widespread notification about upcoming productions and work opportunities.

Only very limited funding for TV script development is available from the Broadcast Development Fund and is tricky to access. The Fund is only for SMEs, and requires confirmed interest from a broadcaster or equivalent, with max of £5k available (matching funding is required which is hard to find elsewhere).

There is a lack of experience of the TV industry.

There is a lack of experience of TV drama development.

Inward investment projects: there is considerable scope to impose more conditions to maximise benefit to regional talent/professionals. Screen WM says it is actively looking at this.

Are all opportunities fully exploited? eg. Toast.

Screen WM could provide contacts/conduits (eg via Board) for regional professionals/talent to access industry decision-makers, and to broker opportunities.

Indepth knowledge of regional projects in development is required, so it can promote/support them.

Indepth knowledge of regional professionals/talent is needed.

Screen WM should vigorously promote and showcase regional projects and professionals/talent inside and outside region.

Is Screen WM lobbying BBC/ITV/etc to view Birmingham as an important drama hub again, challenging anti-Midlands prejudice (our self-effacing culture is widely misunderstood as a lack of confidence)?

Can Screen WM (and others) encourage Drama Commissioners to take an active interest in the region or even to have a presence in the region?

With regard to the BBC, its xM25 policy states: 'Our commissioning teams regularly visit production centres around the country.' This applies to Knowledge, Entertainment & Daytime. But is this happening in terms of drama? Should someone be calling the BBC to account on this? If so, who and how?

Can/should Screen WM lobby BBC Doctors to favour regional talent?

Individuals/companies receiving any funding/support from Screen WM could be tapped for in-kind help – eg workshops, consultancy, publicity, etc – i.e. skill-sharing.

RELATIONSHIPS: Working together

Stronger links are needed between all parties within our region - TV professionals, Producers Forum, Screenwriters Forum, Screen WM, BBC, BCC, BCU, RTS Midlands, BAFTA, BECTU, PACT, Equity, Writers Guild, Creative Republic, games industry, the Tourist Office, National Trust, theatre and radio professionals, etc - all whom could benefit from a stronger TV industry here.

We need stronger links with industry decision-makers outside region – and sharing of these links/information flow.

Agents for writers, directors and actors are mostly London-based, as are casting directors.

EVENTS: Focus for TV drama

Very few TV drama related events take place in the region. Such events could provide a focus for talent/crew/producers, as well as significant regional marketplace/festival/promotion/networking opportunities.

Publicity for industry-related events needs to be early and widespread.

A few excellent events take place without sufficient publicity, resulting in low attendance.

UNIVERSITIES/FE: The next generation

There's a lack of fluidity between screenwriting courses and film-making in the region.

Only limited links exist between student film-makers/actors and professionals

Many 'ground level' entries to BBC drama village (production and editorial) come from regional universities – can this be expanded?

MA in Screenwriting courses are being developed at regional universities - what involvement from regional professionals has there been/will there be/can there be? What other industry-related MAs are on offer/in development?

IMAGE: Promoting the region

We need a powerful online outlet to promote regional work and talent, and to challenge the stereotypical perception of our region.

We need to actively promote the region's skills, talent, locations, resources.

We need clear cost-comparisons, showing the budget advantage of filming here.

There should be more pride in Birmingham's past and present TV achievements.