

In partnership with Action on Hearing Loss, the UK Cinema Association (UKCA) has launched a Technology Challenge Fund, to stimulate development of a solution that allows people with hearing loss to enjoy a better integrated cinema experience. Time to get inventive.

Words: Grainne Peat



FOR A VARIETY OF reasons, many disabled customers in cinemas have difficulties in accessing and enjoying the big screen experience. In response, the UK cinema sector has, over the past decade, developed a number of different and specially-adapted 'accessible screenings' in an attempt to address these issues.

Subtitled screenings – or open captions (OC) – are an accepted way of opening up the cinema-going experience to deaf and hearing-impaired customers. These involve subtitles which relay the script of the film and audio cues at the bottom of the screen. Despite this solution, the cinema sector continues to face challenges around the provision of subtitled screenings. It's generally the case that the wider audience sees the presence of additional text on the screen as a distraction, and therefore they actively avoid such shows. This results in low attendance, which in turn means cinemas are limited in how many subtitled screenings it is economically feasible for them to show.

The peak viewing time conundrum

Cinema operators risk foregoing a significant amount of income in making OC screenings available, these are in general programmed sparingly, and rarely at peak viewing times. As a result, there are fewer and less conveniently programmed OC screenings than customers who are deaf or have some hearing loss would like. When there are technical failures of subtitling equipment, the problem is felt more keenly by deaf and hearing-impaired audience members, for whom that screening might be the sole opportunity in the week to enjoy an accessible cinema visit.

While efforts have been made to increase uptake of the current number of OC screenings, the growth in these has undoubtedly begun to plateau in recent years. This comes at a time when expectations amongst customers with hearing loss

A viable solution that can be widely rolled out will help boost cinemas' accessibility credentials

for better provision understandably have continued to increase. In recent years, a number of new products have emerged on the market which allow subtitling text to be seen by the individual rather than the wider audience. In the main these involve technology whereby text is seen on a personal screen or is displayed across the lenses of viewing glasses.

The ideal solution must:

- Allow for a cinema's hearing-impaired customers to have an integrated experience alongside the general public i.e. they should be able to view subtitles without disturbing other viewers who do not want to view subtitles.
- Be easy to use for both the venue and, importantly, the user
- Be a financially viable solution for venues to install and use
- Be readily compatible with the existing cinema infrastructure
- Projects are expected to develop and test a working prototype in a 'real life' cinema with user feedback.

The challenge we face

While these 'closed' caption (CC) devices, if widely adopted, have the potential significantly to increase access to the cinema for customers who need subtitling, and to allow for a more integrated audience experience, no one solution has yet achieved widespread take-up in cinemas.

In response, the UK Cinema Association, in partnership with Action on Hearing Loss, is proud to launch its Technology Challenge Fund to help stimulate and support development of a technological solution that will

allow people with hearing loss to enjoy a more integrated cinema experience. The UKCA will provide some initial financial incentives for engagement, then – as appropriate – some further limited funding for development of promising concepts, with the hope that support from wider industry partners can be drawn in as the process develops.

Should a suitable, viable product be developed that the cinema sector approves and which meets the desired criteria set out in the aims and objectives, Action on Hearing Loss, will help find a suitable commercial partner to develop and create a market-ready product. The successful applicant will have full Intellectual Property (IP) ownership and will take a percentage of the revenue from product sales. The UKCA and Action on Hearing Loss will promote the product across their networks both across the UK and internationally.

The aim of this competition is to catalyse innovation in technology that will allow people with a hearing loss to have access to an inclusive cinema experience.

Interested? Enter your solution:

Projects eligible for entry to the challenge, can:

- > be from an organisation of any size
 - > you can work alone or in collaboration with others (business, research base, third sector)
- Up to £75,000 of funding is available to support innovative projects in the competition, divided across two phases:
- > Up to £25,000 is available for phase 1 (up to £5,000 for each phase 1 project)
 - > Up to £50,000 is available for phase 2 (up to £25,000 for each phase 2 project)

In phase 1 participants will be expected to demonstrate technical feasibility of their proposed innovation. Projects can range in size up to a total cost of £5,000 each. Technical feasibility projects must be completed within 8 weeks. Phase 1 applicants will be invited to a 'development workshop' where they can refine and discuss initial ideas with industry experts. Phase 1 proposals will be judged by an independent panel, supported by technical peer review.

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The goal is a solution that hearing-impaired customers can use to give a better overall experience



How to apply

The Fund is now taking expressions of interest to attend the launch workshop to be held in September 2018 at a Central London cinema. To apply or if you have questions relating to the Fund, email Grainne Peat, at the UK Cinema Association at grainne.peat@cineamuk.org.uk



Phase 2 is only open to applicants who have completed phase 1 and demonstrated a technically feasible concept. In phase 2, participants will develop and test a working prototype in a 'real life' cinema. Projects can be of any size up to £25,000 and can last up to six months.

Phase 2 applicants will be given access to a cinema to allow testing during development of the prototype and will have access to a technical expert to help ensure that the final solution is technically compatible with existing cinema infrastructure. Phase 2 proposals will also be judged by an independent panel.

A showcase event will be held at the end of the process at which successful prototypes will be demonstrated to stakeholders, including people with hearing loss, cinema operators and potential partners able to support the commercialisation and/or adoption of the most promising solution. **ct**

V FUND TIMELINE

06/18	09/18	10/18	11/18	02/19	03/19	09/19
Applications open to express interest to be involved >	Launch workshop at a Central London cinema >	Development paper for phase one grant	£5,000 phase one grants awarded >	Phase one closes >	£25,000 phase two grants awarded >	Phase two closes