Technology that drives accessibility

Bringing the big screen experience to a wider audience was the motivation behind the UK Cinema Association's Technology Challenge Fund. Chief executive **Phil Clapp** gives an update on its progress.

THE UK CINEMA SECTOR has worked hard over a number of years to make the big screen experience as accessible as possible for disabled customers, making continuous improvements to its physical infrastructure as well as adjustments for those with sensory impairments and, more recently, those on the autism spectrum or with degenerative conditions like dementia. The general approach in the UK has been one driven not solely by the relevant legislation, but also by a desire to share and build on a growing body of best practice across the industry.

While that approach has undoubtedly delivered significant progress across the sector, accessibility still remains an area where ever-increasing audience expectations present an ongoing challenge. But it is also one area where the latest technologies can offer innovative — and often elegant — solutions for cinema operators. To take one example, in recent years audio description (AD) for blind and visually-impaired audiences has been delivered through the provision by each cinema of specially adapted headphones and receivers.

While this has undoubtedly made the cinema a more accessible experience for many, several years on and much of the kit is approaching the point of replacement, this at a time when many disabled customers are more keen than ever to take control of the solutions offered to address their needs.

In response, a number of app-based solutions have been developed, where the customer typically pre-downloads the AD track onto their own mobile device, ready to 'sync' with the film soundtrack on arrival. Although arguably a more elegant way of delivering this solution, these approaches do present a number of issues. First and foremost, mindful of the ever-present risk of film theft, cinemas have spent the past decade and more telling customers to put their mobiles away, and encouraging cinema staff to be on the look-out for those using phones in the cinema. Second, everyone is aware of the annoyance caused to other audience members when someone uses their phone to text, browse (or sometimes to take a call!) during a screening. And thirdly, anything which adds further to the complex workflows observed by distribution colleagues is unlikely to be warmly welcomed.

The UK Cinema Association is currently working through these security and operational implications with its members and distribution colleagues, and is hopeful that an agreed way forward can be brokered. But these things can take time.

And it was time which prompted the association last October to launch its Technology Challenge Fund.

Stirring the crucible of innovation

Having waited a considerable while for the market to offer an acceptable solution for the delivery of 'closed captions' for deaf and hearing-impaired audience members — subtitles visible only to those who need them — the association decided to step in and stimulate innovation in this area. Doing so acknowledged the business opportunity that this audience represents — currently one in six of the UK public identifies as having some form of hearing difficulty, a number which it is estimated will rise to one in five by 2025. But it also recognised that approaches to date — based as they are on the provision of 'open captions', visible to all audience members — are perhaps unlikely ever to deliver the number and range of subtitled screenings necessary to meet demand. For the plain truth — hard though it may be — is that the general

audience does not ordinarily like films projected with open captions, with audiences for such screenings being typically a fraction of those for the same film in the same auditorium at the same time, albeit without subtitles.

A dilemma to resolve

So most cinema operators face the dilemma of wanting to do more, but knowing that the greater provision of subtitled screenings, particularly at busy times, will result in them taking a box office 'hit'. The desire to find a closed caption solution which would make all screenings potentially accessible to deaf and hearing-impaired audiences without asking those audiences to choose between subtitled and non-subtitled screenings is not a new one. Over a number of years, several solutions have emerged on the market, mostly relying either on a secondary screen or more sophisticated subtitling glasses devices. But to date, issues of user experience, operational ease and cost have meant that none has gained widespread traction.

Conscious of increasing pressure on its members to deliver more in terms of subtitling (and of the potential economic impacts of doing so under the current approach), the UKCA sought through the fund to open the conversation up to a wider array of potential partners than had been the case before, with an offer of development funding to the best or most promising solutions. In the end, almost 20 proposals were received, some from existing players in the 'cinema space' but many more from individuals or organisations new to these issues. Accordingly, the solutions proposed varied widely in terms of approach and feasibility.

In identifying the most promising 'runners and riders', the association was able to call on input not just from an expert panel of colleagues from across the cinema industry, but also a user group, convened by Action on Hearing Loss — in partnership with whom the association had launched the fund — and consisting of a number of deaf and hearing-impaired cinema-goers (amongst whom were some of the most outspoken critics of the industry's approach to date).

The expert panel looked at the different proposals from a viewpoint of operational and economic feasibility — anything which required significant adjustments to be made to current operational practices, or came at significant cost (in terms of changes to the projection room or user equipment) was in general subjected to particular scrutiny. The latter group was clear about what it wanted to see from any solution, specifically something which was inclusive, not singling out audience members as a result of disability and applicable across the widest possible range of film releases.

Support for the fund was divided into specific tranches. As we enter phase two of that process, a significant amount has been allocated to each of three short-listed solutions, the aim being (where relevant) to develop a prototype ready for further 'field testing'.

Two of those solutions – from the German company Great & Starks and from the National Theatre, rely on a subtitling glasses solution (albeit in slightly different ways). The latter is already active in the theatre sector. The remaining solution, from the UK company Screen Language working with the German Fraunhofer Institute, while a little further away from development, offers an interesting take on the secondary screen approach, albeit without it is anticipated any significant need for investment by the cinema operator.

We look forward to providing further updates on the Technology Challenge Fund and on developing our approach on delivery of audio-description over the coming months. **CT**