

Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board Funding Programmes

Procedures: Aims & Practice

On 1st July 2006 BSÉ/IFB introduced changes to the ways in which it considers projects and reaches decisions with regard to its funding of development and production. These changes are still in force. An updated version of the explanatory text published in June 2006 is reproduced in this section.

Note: procedures for the consideration of MPD applications, and short films, Catalyst Project, Documenting the Arts and distribution applications are specific to those programmes and not dealt with directly here.

General Aims

Development

Applicants will be strongly encouraged to submit projects at an earlier stage than has been the prevailing practice. In the great majority of cases, BSÉ/IFB will seek to become involved in the support of a project before a first draft screenplay has been written, when the project exists only as an idea, an outline or a treatment. BSÉ/IFB will be ready to take an early-stage risk on both new and experienced screenwriters, and recognises a responsibility to enable writers to be paid from the inception of a project.

Notwithstanding BSÉ/IFB's earlier entry into a project, where a producer is involved and a full development plan is in place BSÉ/IFB will generally be prepared to make an in-principle commitment to provide support throughout the development of a project, subject to periodic reassurance as to satisfactory progress. Rather than requiring re-application on behalf of a project at each stage of writing or practical preparation, BSÉ/IFB will take an 'innocent until proved guilty' attitude to projects it elects to support: its Development Executive will engage in regular discussions with the filmmaking team as work progresses, and will be empowered to release (or withhold) further funding as requested within budget parameters agreed at the outset.

BSÉ/IFB's preference for supporting projects from their inception does not preclude applications on behalf of projects already partly developed. These will also be candidates for an in-principle commitment of support by BSÉ/IFB over the remaining period of their development.

All BSÉ/IFB's creative executives will follow the course of projects that proceed through development towards production, in order to ensure continuity of opinion and feedback across the agency.

These two changes – provision of support from an earlier stage and in-principle commitments to a higher level of support from the start – are likely to mean that the number of projects approved for development funding from BSÉ/IFB in a given year will decrease. In effect, the hurdle may be set slightly higher. Equally, the process should be simpler and more interactive, and rejection of a project before a significant amount of writing has been done should be more tolerable.

Production

The intention here is to encourage a somewhat different relationship between BSÉ/IFB and its applicants. The previous requirement to submit a project, with a comprehensive set of elements already in place, to an adjudication process – after which the sum of money applied for is either awarded or not – will be replaced by an invitation to producers to propose projects to BSÉ/IFB at an earlier stage and seek an in-principle commitment of support.

Where this is forthcoming, it will start a process of discussion between the producer and BSÉ/IFB as to the assembly of the film's creative package and overall financing, with BSÉ/IFB executives ready to provide assistance in the film's preparation to the extent appropriate and useful. In the best cases, where the film becomes fully financed and can be put into production, this process will have led to negotiation and confirmation of the amount and terms of BSÉ/IFB's investment.

Where an in-principle commitment of support is not forthcoming from BSÉ/IFB, the producer, having expended less time and resources on preparation of the project so far, is in a better position to decide how next to proceed with it: whether to take BSÉ/IFB's response to it into account and attempt to re-shape it with the aim of re-submitting it; or to move on and seek to finance it from other sources; or to abandon it in favour of other projects on his/her current development slate.

In either event, the aim of the procedure will be to foster a mature, interactive relationship between producers and BSÉ/IFB executives, based on dialogue and mutual respect between professionals. No system can be devised for the funding of creative work whereby measurement against a set of objective criteria leads to an incontrovertible positive or negative decision. In such an inexact science, best practice is likely to result where applicants recognise the inevitable part played by subjectivity in all decisions, and decision-makers accept their obligation to explain and defend a position.

The new procedure does not preclude producers from applying to BSÉ/IFB at a later stage, as hitherto, with most other elements in place, if they prefer.

New Procedures In Practice

Development Funding

- 1 The most significant procedural changes in BSÉ/IFB's consideration of projects submitted for Project Development Loans are to the *modus operandi* of the funding – availability at the very beginning of the writing process and as a single commitment over the whole period of development, subject to performance – as explained at the start of this paper.
- 2 Applications can be accepted at any time, and decisions will generally be reached on a monthly basis. Projects submitted will first be assessed by the Development Executive (Andrew Meehan) working with the Production & Development Coordinator (Sarah Dillon). Reports from external readers will be requested if deemed useful. Some applications may then be rejected, without further consultation, if judged to be particularly weak.

- 3 Applications retained as interesting may be sent to members of an Advisory Group of between four and six non-BSÉ/IFB consultants, some Irish, some not, with a variety of experience in film – in distribution, exhibition, sales, acting, cinematography, as well as in writing, directing, producing. Advisory Group members will be asked to respond to the proposal – the idea, the concept, the basic story set out in the application – in terms of its potential, if well realised, as a film for the cinema. (The Advisory Group will assess outlines or treatments only, not screenplays.) They will be encouraged to be rigorous. Although their contribution to the process will be strictly advisory, not decisive, a body of opinion one way or the other among a diverse group of professionals is likely to be both revealing and persuasive. Advisory Group members will not be asked to serve for more than one or two years, so that the mix can be regularly refreshed.
- 4 With the responses of the Advisory Group taken into account, decisions will be made on each month's batch of submissions by the Development team working with the Production team (for the identity of Production team members, see B.1 below). An executive from the Legal & Business Affairs team may examine the development budget submitted and assist the Development team in negotiating with the producer to make adjustments, before an in-principle commitment ("provisional approval") is given to the project's development plan.
- 5 Provisional approvals of development funding require ratification by the Board of BSÉ/IFB.
- 6 Following provisional approval of a project by BSÉ/IFB, which includes specific approval of the first tranche of funding to be made available, development of the project will proceed in agreed stages, with the Development Executive empowered to authorise further funding as required, or to cut off funding if he (together with any BSÉ/IFB colleagues he elects to consult) concludes that the project and its sponsors have ceased to make useful progress.
- 7 There was a period of transition from the previous situation, where most development applications were made with a draft screenplay already written, to the point where such applications are now rare exceptions. While BSÉ/IFB executives will discourage applications with screenplays henceforward, these will continue to be accepted in circumstances of particular merit.
- 8 In addition to taking a long-term approach to the funding of projects in development by producers, as described so far in this section, BSÉ/IFB remains fully committed to its provision of support for writers applying on their own. After a transitional period of six months the writers-only awards scheme is now strictly limited to proposals to start from scratch, i.e. where no draft screenplay has yet been written. Further, the scheme is extended to encourage directors to initiate project development to a greater extent than at present.
- 9 Specifically, applications to the scheme, called First Draft Loans (as opposed to Project Development Loans made to producers), are invited from writers on their own, from writer-directors, and from teams of writers and directors. Directors who do not themselves write, and who have not decided upon a writer for a story they have conceived or discovered and want eventually to

realise, may choose to approach BSÉ/IFB in order to request names, discuss possible candidates, read material, and so on. Thus the scheme is open both to individual writers (including writer-directors) and to teams of directors and writers. As before, the level of funding available under the First Draft Loans scheme is fixed, but higher and subject to periodic review: currently the amount awarded to writers and writer-directors is €12,000; to writing teams and writer-directors, €14,000; and to teams of directors and writers, €16,000 to be shared between them as they agree. All rights in projects supported remain with the writers or, in the case of directors and writers working together, as they agree between them.

- 10 Applications for First Draft Loans are subject to the same procedure as Project Development Loans, including consideration by the Advisory Group where a project is retained as interesting by BSÉ/IFB's executives.

Production Funding

- 1 Before making a formal submission for most types of production funding, producers are asked to make informal contact with one of BSÉ/IFB's Production team: the Chief Executive (Simon Perry) or one of the Production Executives (Emma Scott, Alan Maher). This will allow the executive to gather basic information about the project and give advice with regard to the prospective application – its timing, any further work needed, legal or other obstacles, etc. An application will not be accepted (i.e. logged in and processed) without this prior discussion having taken place.
- 2 Applications can be made at any time throughout the year. Application forms should be used: the form requests basic information on the project (title, previous history with BSÉ/IFB if any), contact details of the production company and principal creative personnel (producer, director, writer) and a declaration and signature. It also lists additional materials that should be submitted, relating to the content and scale of the project (e.g. screenplay, CVs, budget information, etc) These vary depending on the type of funding applied for and in every case are essential to the consideration process. This is all that is required at this stage. Where a project receives an in-principle commitment of support (“provisional approval”) further documents will be required in due course by BSÉ/IFB's Legal & Business Affairs team.
- 3 Each application will be logged in by the Applications Coordinator (Jill McGregor) and will be assigned to one of the three members of the Production team (see above) by agreement among them. Further discussion of the project may then take place between the producer and the executive handling it; in any event the screenplay will be read, and the elements of the project assessed, by members of the Project Group, as next described.
- 4 Funding decisions are no longer taken by a Production Panel (which consisted of certain BSÉ/IFB executives, together with a BSÉ/IFB board member and an 'external', different on each occasion) but by a Project Group comprising all members of BSÉ/IFB Production and Development teams, members of the Legal & Business Affairs team and, on an *ad hoc* basis, consultants drawn from a small pool of non-BSÉ/IFB professionals retained for their specific skills. Each submission will have been given in-depth consideration by individual members of the Project Group. Meetings of the Project Group are held monthly, video-conferenced between Galway and

Dublin if necessary, and more frequently when the volume of submissions is unusually high.

- 5 Positive decisions by the Project Group will be expressed as provisional approvals which will then require formal endorsement by the Board of BSÉ/IFB and thereafter be communicated to applicants. Endorsement is generally sought from the Board by email following a meeting of the Project Group and, if forthcoming, communicated to applicants within one week.
- 6 BSÉ/IFB will not normally quantify its financial commitment to a project when giving a provisional approval unless this is insisted upon by the producer, in which case an 'up to' figure may be specified. As a general rule, the exact amount of BSÉ/IFB's investment will be determined in the course of subsequent negotiations between the producer, BSÉ/IFB and other financiers, the objective being for BSÉ/IFB to provide the minimum level of funding needed to enable production to proceed as planned (see section on Additionality elsewhere [\[link\]](#)).
- 7 Provisional approval of a project by BSÉ/IFB signifies sufficient commitment to enable a producer to represent to other prospective financiers that the project has the full support of the national agency subject to BSÉ/IFB's statutory funding constraints and negotiation of the terms of its investment. Once provisional approval has been given, BSÉ/IFB is effectively 'on board' and negotiations by its Legal & Business Affairs team will start in earnest, in parallel with monitoring by BSÉ/IFB's Production Executives of the project's creative and practical progress towards production.
- 8 BSÉ/IFB will give final approval to a project once the terms of its investment are agreed by all parties and the film is fully financed. Final approval, including the amount of funding to be provided by BSÉ/IFB, will also require ratification by the Board before contracts are signed.
- 9 Following a negative decision by the Project Group, a project may be re-submitted to BSÉ/IFB only if significant, material changes have been made to the package, i.e. to the screenplay, to key creative elements such as casting, or to the production cost. All unsuccessful applications will be notified to the Board.
- 10 A project will be considered for production funding by BSÉ/IFB only if:
 - (a) the application is made by a *bona fide* producer with a production company established in Ireland or another state of the European Union;
 - and
 - (b) there is a director committed to making the film.
- 11 The procedure described so far is used to assess applications on behalf of documentaries, animation and TV fiction as well as features, with certain small variations to take account of the nature of the material being considered. The application form for documentaries does not refer to a screenplay or cast, for example, but to a detailed outline of the content of the film. Animation projects will continue to benefit from additional consideration by non-BSÉ/IFB consultants with specialist knowledge of the field. Applications for completion funding continue to be considered – on a yes-or-no basis, with no provisional approval stage.

12 It used to be the practice for all development funding applications on behalf of documentary and animation projects to be considered by the Production Panel (while all other development applications went through a Development Panel process). There have been two changes here. First, as a general rule BSÉ/IFB no longer provides development funding for documentaries as a stand-alone activity: in most cases, where a documentary proposal in outline is felt to be strong enough to deserve BSÉ/IFB support, an in-principle commitment to both development and production will be made. Subject to basic legal requirements being met, the aim will be for BSÉ/IFB to start 'drip-feed' funding of the project as research and other preparatory work get underway, until the necessary co-finance is in place and full production can start. Second, certain animation projects may benefit from being handled in the same way, where the most effective way to develop characters and visuals is to start a process of pilot production which, if successful, can lead directly into full-scale production. But where, on the other hand, development of an animation project also requires intensive screenplay work, BSÉ/IFB is likely to suggest it should be submitted under the development funding procedures described above.