

Documentary Film Council Open Assembly 2023: Summary Findings

11/09/2023

Overview

This document presents a summary of the views presented at the launch event and first Open Assembly of the Documentary Film Council (DFC) at Sheffield DocFest on Saturday June 17 2023. The principal objective of the DFC Assembly is to provide a dedicated, independent space in which the UK documentary community can discuss the priorities and problems that the DFC, as the industry's representative body, should seek to address. The views presented at the Assembly are vital in helping the DFC's Board and Leadership Team to develop the DFC's strategic agenda, including the funded Committees that will be a key part of carrying out that agenda. Our sincere thanks to everyone who attended and contributed to the event.

As the name suggests, the DFC's Open Assembly is open to everyone, regardless of whether or not they have a DocFest pass or are a Member, Ally or Supporter of the DFC (if you haven't joined yet, please do so!). There will be other opportunities throughout the year for the different categories of the DFC's membership to feed into its strategic agenda (please note that only DFC Members are eligible to vote and participate in decision-making).

Because this first Assembly also functioned as the DFC's launch event, it began with an introduction and Q+A about the organisation's development, its mission and governance structure and the plans for the DFC's future. The rest of the event, which was attended by approximately 200 people, consisted of a facilitated discussion session based on the following five key questions:

1. How do you feel about the DFC's co-operative governance structure? What would you keep/change/improve?
2. What are the key dynamics in the industry right now that we should be thinking about?
3. It's 2026: 3 years from now the DFC has completed its first term. What has the DFC realistically achieved in this time?
4. What should the DFC committees be focusing on?
5. You have a magic wand for changing the documentary sector - what would you do with it?

The different groups in the room wrote down their answers using the materials provided and also fed back verbally to the room as a whole. The event was filmed - see this short [highlight video here](#) - and the materials were also collected and analysed by the DFC's Leadership Team, which has drafted this document.

Executive summary

You can read detailed accounts of the responses to each question below. We have condensed the key priorities as follows:

- **Funding**
 - Early development particularly urgent
 - Standardisation of application processes
- **Develop and respond to policy interventions**
 - Media Bill
 - Audio-Visual Media Services Directive
 - Artificial Intelligence
 - Standard terms and conditions of work (day rates, hours, paid holiday)
 - Decarbonisation
- **Distribution and exhibition**
 - Improve transparency and coordination in distribution
 - Improved support for doc exhibition in nations and regions
- **Diversity, Ethics and Mental Health**
 - Safeguarding wellbeing of filmmakers and subjects
- **Education and training**
 - Improved relations with HE providers/new talent
 - Training for leaders
 - Co-production
 - More support from ScreenSkills
 - Advice booklets on industry landscape
- **Developing the DFC**
 - Build the membership
 - Regional chapters
 - Promoting understanding of documentary as separate ecosystem
 - Annual conference

1. How do you feel about the DFC's co-operative governance structure? What would you keep/change/improve?

The feedback here was generally very positive. The affordable subscription rates for Allies and Members were acknowledged as inclusive and welcoming, and the democratic governance structure was described as bold and forward-thinking. Groups emphasised how important it is for the DFC's membership to be the controlling force in the organisation and not just a way of funding it, and that the Board and Leadership Team should a) ensure that new voices are heard and represented within the organisation; b) ensure that the DFC maintains an interdisciplinary outlook and interfaces with other organisations and sectors beyond just documentary; and c) ensure the DFC is action-oriented, and avoids becoming a body that facilitates moaning... Regular self-evaluation was noted as key to this.

Regional representation on the board was suggested. While the Interim Board includes representation from all the nations and regions of the UK, and only 4 of the 14 Directors are based in London, there is currently no mechanism in the DFC's Rules to ensure regional representation on the Board. It was also suggested that the DFC could explore the possibility of developing regional chapters (see 'Committees', below). This idea has come up before - DFC chapters could perhaps be based on the regional structure of the BFI's Film Audience Network, which could be a good way of developing a relationship with that broader organisational structure.

There was some disagreement within one of the groups regarding a proposal for stricter membership criteria (this was also discussed in the feedback session). Advocates argued that without entry criteria - such as a minimum level of credits - there was a risk that the DFC's membership could become too broad and 'watered down'. Others argued that this would make the DFC an exclusive organisation and that determining who is and isn't a documentary professional would be contentious and time-consuming. No vote was taken on this but the majority appeared to favour the more inclusive approach.

2. What are the key dynamics in the industry right now that we should be thinking about?

Unsurprisingly, one of the major themes was the harsh economic conditions in the industry at the moment, particularly with regards to funding broadcast documentary, with a key concern being the lack of dedicated slots on UK television for independent documentary. Groups emphasised how the challenges facing documentary filmmakers are distinct from those in the fiction sector and the widespread challenges facing documentary in both film and television, noting the 'emergency' recently declared by BECTU regarding the number of professionals out of work in the non-scripted sector. Mental health - of both filmmakers and participants - was therefore also identified as a priority, with groups noting that safeguarding and duty of care was essential not only during production but also afterwards, in the exhibition phase and beyond.

With regards to filmmakers, familiar concerns emerged regarding financial wellbeing and inequality (of money and power) between those that make films and those that commission them. Improving and regulating day rates, ensuring standardised working hours and paid holidays were emphasised as important priorities for the DFC to focus on. Though obviously wider than the documentary sector, a form of income support or Universal Basic Income (UBI) for artists - such as the L'intermittent du Spectacle (IDS) scheme as exists in France - was noted as a means of developing a fairer system of pay.

Building a more accessible and diverse industry was another clear priority. This is closely related to economic conditions, given that these effectively screen out those less able to cope with them. Because one of the key issues was the lack of development funding and the large amount of labour required before a commission was likely, groups emphasised that an equivalent system to the Arts Council's 'Developing Your Creative Practice' (DYCP) programme would be extremely helpful.¹ (Please note that the Scottish Documentary Institute's 'Write Now' scheme, launched in August 2023, is specifically designed to support the 'early development and writing phase', though applicants must be Scotland-based).

Echoing concerns that have been raised elsewhere in the industry, groups questioned the value of pitching forums - 'pitchification' - and the costs of these events for the emerging filmmakers they are often aimed at. Supporting emerging filmmakers was another key theme though, as was increasing transparency in the sector with regards funding spend (accessible annual reports) and the landscape of support available. Suggestions included developing advice booklets on how to access funding, crew and distribution support for independent projects.

3. It's 2026 and the DFC has completed its first term. What has the DFC realistically achieved in this time? What is different as a result of DFC's work?

Many groups focused on the development of the DFC itself. People clearly want the organisation to have a large, diverse and engaged membership, and see a lot of potential in the community-building role of the DFC. Groups expressed the importance of the DFC establishing a relationship with the government and the DCMS, as well as a desire for the DFC to build a 'strong social network that was easily accessible to filmmakers' and that enabled 'the exchange of information and ideas'. The need for shared resources was also emphasised here (including again a call for maps of the industry and lists of relevant organisations and so on). Many groups were hopeful about the potential of the DFC's Talent Directory, seeing that as a genuine tool for inclusion

¹ The DYCP programme was established in 2018 to support independent artists with time to develop their practice. The programme aims to 'encourage creativity, research, experimentation and risk taking', and awards grants of £2000 to £12,000. More information about the programme is available at <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/dyccp>.

and access that could provide real opportunities for the workforce so long as employers made use of it.

One group called for 'an annual conference', arguing that there are enough festivals but that there was a need to bring the sector together over an extended period of time to develop and coordinate responding to the challenges facing the sector. Festival passes were described as prohibitively expensive, and that a conference should be more accessible, with passes freely available.

Beyond visions for the organisation itself, some groups articulated a desire for achievements in a broader sense. For example, imagining the 'recognition of independent documentary as a distinct part of the industry', hoping for 'a healthier, more sustainable independent docs sector', or 'a better dialogue between film and TV'. Others were more specific. For example, one group focused on a set of union-approved agreements regarding minimum standards and best practises in the industry 'working conditions, contributor care, mental health etc', while another called for 'DFC reps on funder boards'.

Other groups suggested the DFC should establish relationships with universities to better manage the flow of new talent into the sector. There were some concerns cited with regards to new talent, with some suggesting the numbers of filmmakers entering the industry were unrealistic and that there is a need to 'stem the flow of emerging creatives to balance the industry's ecosystem'.

4. What should the DFC committees be focusing on?

Proposals for committees largely mirrored the key concerns expressed by the different groups. Most groups proposed ideas for different committees(as outlined under the categories below.

Funding

A major emphasis was on the need for more funding in the sector. As noted above, development funding is a priority and groups called for more dedicated documentary broadcast slots as well for more support from SVODs. However, groups also expressed a need for support with developing international co-productions, and called on UK-based funders to 'make all funding applications the same!'. Making all applications identical may be impractical, but there could be scope for funders to more clearly align themselves with [The Nonfiction Core Application Project](#), initiated in 2016 (and revised in 2022) by Sundance Institute in partnership with the International Documentary Association to alleviate the burden on filmmakers of re-writing applications for each funder approached.

Broader policy interventions

Arguing for greater funding for independent documentary is obviously a policy priority, but groups also emphasised broader concerns and that a key part of the DFC's work must be to intervene in national policy. Groups suggested that a key priority for a policy committee should be developing a response to the proposed Media Bill, for example. Although the pre-legislative scrutiny phase for this Bill ended in July, the Bill will still need to be formally introduced in Parliament, where it will move through the usual legislative process in each house. If a DFC policy Committee was able to develop a position on the Bill, the DFC membership could potentially influence the Bill's development via their MPs.

Other policy priorities identified by the groups included developing levies or quotas on SVODs (possibly modelled on the EU's Audio Visual Media Services Directive); researching the risks and opportunities associated with Artificial Intelligence; developing a set of recognised union agreements to ensure minimum standards of terms and conditions; and for general committees on environmental sustainability and decarbonisation; and on filmmakers' ability to work in the EU.

Developing the DFC

For many groups, developing the DFC as an organisation was an important job for the first Committees. Many groups emphasised the importance of establishing a presence in the nations and regions - with suggestions for regional chapters. This could be the responsibility of a dedicated Committee and/or part of the work of the DFC's Leadership Team and Board. Similarly, 'building a platform for networking and making the sector feel accessible' was also felt to be a priority and is another task that could be allocated to a Committee and/or part of the Leadership Team's responsibilities. A robust Code of Conduct was suggested to ensure good practice and behaviour across all DFC Committees.

Other groups emphasised that raising the profile of the DFC was a key part of the process of increasing understanding of documentary as a social, cultural and democratic good. Doc Society's ongoing project to develop a definition of independent documentary will be a major step forward here, and something the DFC can help promote across the sector.²

Education/training

Echoing concerns mentioned above, a committee on education and training Committee could help build better relationships between Higher Education providers and industry bodies and improve the way in which new entrants enter the industry. One concrete task suggested for this Committee was developing an overview of all documentary courses offered in the UK at Undergraduate and Postgraduate level as well as courses by private providers.

² There was some confusion regarding the relationship between Doc Society and the DFC, with one group suggesting that the DFC should seek to work with Doc Society. To clarify, the DFC has been developed in partnership with Doc Society and the other documentary organisations in the UK, and has been designed as a complementary addition to those organisations. As such, Doc Society is - along with several other organisations, filmmakers, and producers - represented on the DFC's Interim Board.

Groups also emphasised that mentoring is a potentially effective means of providing training and support for new entrants but that mentors needed to be paid for their time. Alongside calling on ScreenSkills for more dedicated support for the independent documentary sector, groups also noted a need for leadership training, noting that those who manage to gain more senior positions in the industry also lack support. Specific training and support for developing co-productions in the post-Brexit landscape was also mentioned several times.

Ethics and duty of care

Building on the concerns regarding mental health of both filmmakers and their subjects, there were suggestions for a Committee based on ethics and duty of care (which could perhaps include responsibility for the Code of Conduct mentioned above).

5. You have a magic wand for changing the documentary sector - what would you do with it?

Many of the proposals here reiterated concerns expressed elsewhere. 'Greater financial support on the journey to rough cut', for example, 'shorter hours to benefit mental health and family life', were typical. Groups also expressed a desire for greater risk-taking on the part of commissioners, and suggested there could be quotas for independent film on broadcasters and/or a renewed focus on what constitutes public service (see Media Bill, above). Other suggestions regarding broadcasters included proposals for a 'UK version' of Independent Television Service (ITVS) in the US, which funds and broadcasts documentaries on public television. Calls for '4-5 new documentary slots' on broadcasters was another magic wand ambition.

Other responses to this question addressed perceived power imbalances in the industry, with groups criticising the prevalence of hierarchical structures and calling for power to be distributed more evenly. Greater diversity of on-screen representation and offscreen talent was also included in this section.

Support for exhibition and distribution was emphasised here, too. Respondents argued that too many 'festival films aren't getting seen', and called for more strategic coordination and transparency in distribution. One group wished for 'a publicly-funded documentary screen in every town'.