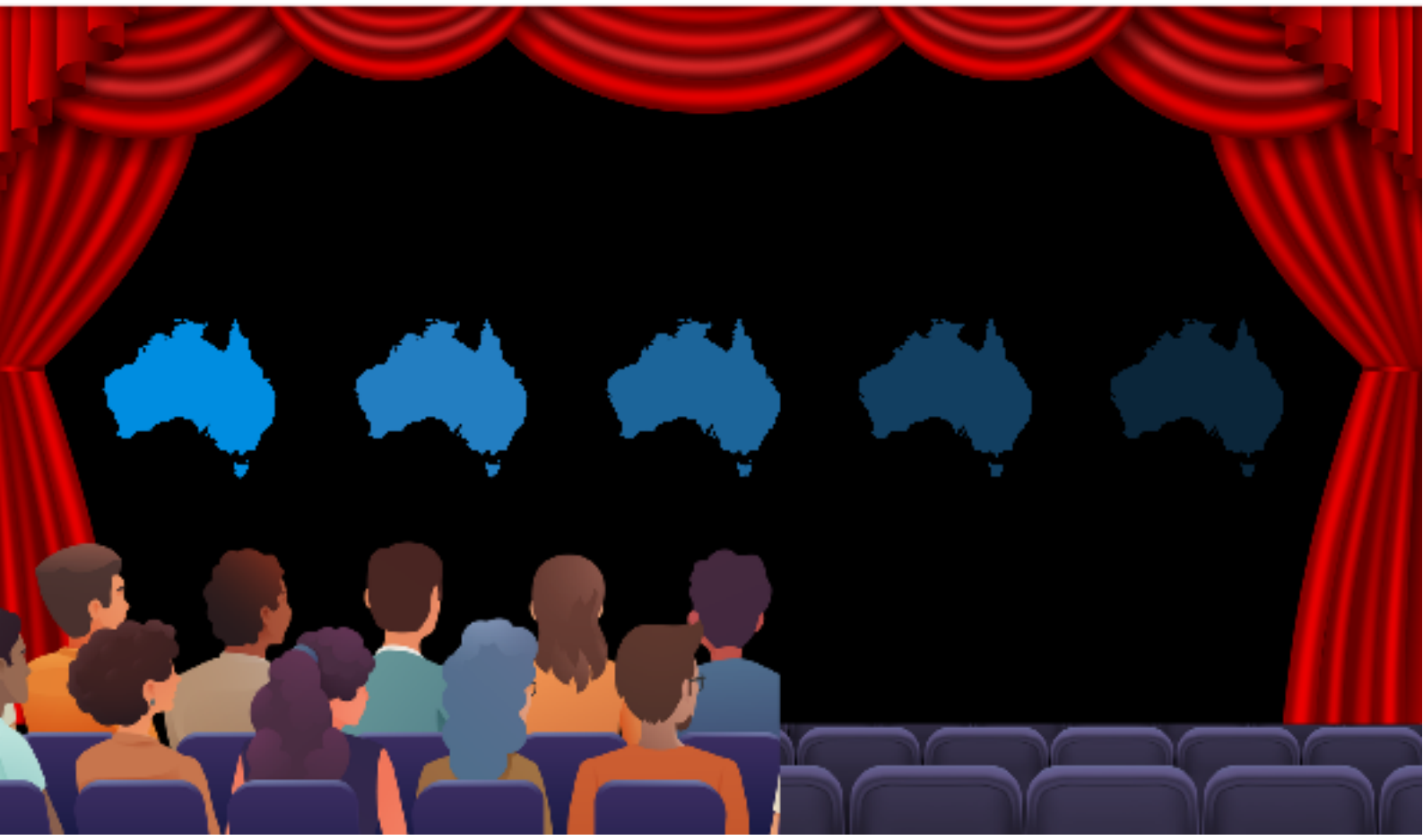
Made, Not Seen

Did We Lose the Audience?

The Misalignment of Australian Film, Cinema and Audiences.

By Nick Hayes



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Australian Box Office Report: Part Two | By Nick Hayes

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Primary data sources: Numero Australia (2021 – 2025); ABS Census 2021 (Cat. 2001.0).

MPDAA Australian BO Dataset 1990-2025,Classification Branch (Classification Database 2021-2025)

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MADE, NOT SEEN

For Jenny, Jenny and Carmel.

The two migrants who stayed, and the one who got away.
Three extraordinary Australians who made Sydney their home,
even if only for a while, and made my life better as a result.

And for the Batty Sisters, Renae, Alison and Roslyn.

To have three of the finest women in your corner is no small thing.

And finally, for Harper and Archer.

May your lives be filled with local stories that reflect the remarkable place we live.

This work benefited immeasurably from the insight, discipline and editorial judgment of Albert Pitt, whose challenges were as valuable as his affirmations. Where we disagreed, the process sharpened the analysis and strengthened the final arguments.

Responsibility for the content and any remaining errors rests solely with the author.

Foreword

I am the CEO of Independent Cinemas Australia (ICA), but this research predates that role.

In August 2025, independently and without institutional backing, I undertook an investigation into foreign-language film opportunities for Australian cinemas. In the course of that work, the performance of Australian films emerged as a more significant and troubling concern. As the analysis deepened and the first report was completed, it became clear that a second, more complex story needed to be told.

Some of the findings presented here are necessarily critical of Screen Australia. That is uncomfortable terrain, given its role as the primary steward of public screen funding. When this work commenced and the bulk of it was undertaken, I was operating independently, unencumbered by agency funding or institutional affiliation, and able to speak freely. Since then, I have assumed the role of CEO of ICA, which requires a more measured public posture.

Screen Australia was informed of the subject matter of this second report when the first report was submitted. I have since met with the CEO and two senior executives to discuss policy, data and the connection between Australian stories and Australian audiences. They were highly engaged, thoughtful and clearly passionate about strengthening that connection.

This report should be read in that spirit. Its critique is not directed at individuals, but at the policy architecture within which they operate

The ICA Board was briefed on the chapter outlines during the appointment process. The report is published without editorial intervention.

This report is authored in a personal capacity and reflects the views of the author alone. It does not represent a formal policy position of Independent Cinemas Australia.

Executive Summary

Australian cinema is not suffering from audience indifference.
It is suffering from structural misalignment.

Australians continue to attend cinemas in large numbers. They choose films that are clearly marketed, culturally aligned, well timed and easy to access. What they are not being offered with consistency is Australian cinema that meets those same conditions.

Over the past 17 years, Australia has more than doubled the number of Australian films produced, yet audience reach has fallen sharply. Attendance per Australian film has collapsed. Average box office per local title has more than halved. This is not a cyclical downturn, nor is it simply a post-pandemic correction. It is a structural outcome.

The central failure identified in this report is not production. It is access.

Australian screen policy has been built around getting films made but not around ensuring they can reliably reach the public. The system funds development and production, provides significant tax support through the Producer Offset, and reports on projects completed. But it does not adequately fund, protect, coordinate or measure the conditions that allow Australian films to be seen.

Those conditions include:

- clear audience positioning
- commercial-grade marketing materials
- sensible release timing
- access to enough screens and sessions
- viable cinemas in the communities audiences actually live in
- public reporting that follows films beyond completion and into release

At present, these conditions are too often treated as downstream market issues. They are not. They are central to whether public investment delivers public cultural value.

The report finds that Australian films are routinely weakened before audiences have a genuine chance to respond. They are too often concentrated in a narrow range of adult drama and documentary, while family, comedy, animation, youth and genre films remain under-supplied. They are frequently released into crowded or commercially hostile windows. They are not always supported by marketing assets that cinemas can use with confidence. They enter a national exhibition network that is increasingly fragile, unevenly distributed and poorly aligned with population growth.

Cinema itself has been misunderstood in policy. It is not merely a commercial outlet at the end of the value chain. It is cultural infrastructure. Cinemas are where films meet the public. They anchor town centres, activate night-time economies and provide one of the few remaining shared civic spaces where Australians gather across age, income, geography and language.

Where cinemas are absent, fragile or under-screened, audience access is structurally constrained. This is particularly acute in regional areas, outer-metropolitan growth corridors and lower-SES communities. These are not communities that have rejected cinema. In many cases, they have been left without reasonable access to it.

The same misalignment appears in the national slate. Australia is a multilingual, multicultural country, yet Australian theatrical production remains overwhelmingly monolingual and narrow in cultural reach. Foreign-language films, particularly Indian cinema, have demonstrated that Australian audiences will respond strongly when films are culturally aligned, genre-clear and consistently supplied. Their success does not prove that Australian audiences have turned away from local films. It proves the opposite: audiences are selective, active and reachable when the offer makes sense.

The report also finds that current data and reporting frameworks are inadequate. Government can see how many films were funded, how much was spent and how many projects were completed. It cannot consistently see how many Australians saw those films in cinemas, where they played, how long they ran, how many sessions they received, whether marketing was release-ready, or whether public funding translated into public experience.

This is a broken feedback loop.

Without transparent theatrical data, producers cannot identify market opportunities, distributors cannot plan with confidence, exhibitors cannot schedule with clarity, agencies cannot evaluate policy effectiveness, and government cannot properly assess whether public investment is reaching the public.

This report does not argue for fewer Australian films. It argues for a better-aligned system.

The solution is not to abandon cultural ambition, nor to copy Hollywood scale. The solution is to reconnect production with audience access. That requires a national screen policy that treats exhibition, marketing readiness, release coordination, data transparency and cinema access as core public responsibilities, not optional extras.

The core recommendations are:

1) Embed exhibition and audience access within national screen policy so the system is responsible not only for making films, but for ensuring they can reach the public.
2) Enforce marketing readiness as a genuine release condition, so trailers, posters, stills and audience positioning are treated as commercial essentials, not administrative afterthoughts.
3) Introduce stronger national release coordination to reduce self-cannibalisation, avoid commercially hostile windows and give Australian films a fairer chance to build momentum.
4) Modernise data collection and public reporting so government and industry can measure admissions, access, sessions, audience reach and release outcomes, not merely projects completed.
5) Establish a targeted exhibition renewal program to protect cinema access in regional, outer-metropolitan and lower-SES communities where closure risk is rising.
6) Rebalance existing subsidy settings toward audience outcomes so public investment is better aligned with public visibility, cultural participation and long-term screen value.
7) Reform planning frameworks so cinemas and other shared cultural venues are recognised as civic and cultural infrastructure, particularly in transport-led renewal precincts, town centres and fast-growing communities.

Part Two also proposes a practical delivery model: a national reboot built around a 12-film theatrical slate, marketing uplift, targeted cinema renewal and a reformed festival funding model that treats festivals as exhibition infrastructure rather than discretionary promotional activity.
These reforms are not about rescuing an industry from audience rejection. They are about correcting a system that has lost sight of the audience it exists to serve.

Australian cinema does not have a talent problem or a taste problem.
It has an alignment problem.
And alignment can be fixed.

How did we get here? The 2007–08 policy reset

Pre-Reset (1973–2006)

1973 Film Australia established National documentary production and public information mandate

1975 - Australian Film Commission (AFC) Development, research, distribution and screen access Industry policy and cultural exhibition support

1988 - Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) Specialist production investment body Commercial finance and recoupment focus

1988–2008 Film Australia Limited continues

National documentary and archive work
Public access and educational dissemination
2004–06 – The 10BA Transition

From investor tax shelter model to producer-based rebate model

2007–08 Reset

May 2007 – Treasurer Peter Costello agrees to a Producer Offset Part of broader reform including consolidation of three federal screen agencies

July 2007 - Producer Offset commences Primary Commonwealth production incentive

July 2008 Screen Australia created

Reform initiated under the Howard Government and legislated under Minister Peter Garrett AFC, FFC and Film Australia merged into one national agency

Structural Shift
From plural agencies with distinct cultural, financial and exhibition functions to a single national production-centred body.

Author's Note: References to the reforms are used as shorthand for the broader 2007–08 reform package, including the consolidation of federal screen agencies into Screen Australian through the Screen Australia Act and the introduction of the Screen Production Incentive framework.

Introduction

Film has been central to Australian life since its commercialisation. When Justice Higgins delivered the landmark *Harvester judgment* in 1907, he defined a living wage not only as the amount required for food, shelter and clothing, but as the income necessary for a worker and his family to participate in civic life. In that framing, cultural participation mattered, including the cost of a weekly cinema visit.

What matters for present purposes is not the social framing of the Harvester judgment, but its substance. In 1907, in a young federation and former penal colony far removed from imperial centres of power, an Australian court articulated a principle that was both radical and enduring: that the state has a legitimate role in setting structural conditions where markets alone cannot deliver socially necessary outcomes.

That reasoning was extraordinary for its time. It recognised that fairness, access and sustainability do not reliably emerge from unregulated market behaviour, and that public policy must sometimes intervene at the level of structure rather than outcome. This report draws on that same tradition of Australian policy pragmatism, applying it to contemporary screen policy, audience access and cultural infrastructure.

Film waxes and wanes in cycles, but it remains essential to cultural participation and national belonging. For more than a century, cinema has been Australia's most popular cultural activity. Attendance at the movies consistently exceeds other art forms by a significant margin, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics and major cultural participation surveys. Cinema is also one of the few cultural activities that attracts the full diversity of the population across age, income, geography and language. It operates as social infrastructure as much as entertainment.

Film matters because it combines scale, reach and emotional impact in a way no other medium can replicate. Australians see themselves reflected, challenged and entertained. It can unite communities, build understanding across cultures and generations, and provide the basis for genuinely national moments of shared experience. For example, a film such as The Dry, which drew more than 2.05 million Australians to cinemas, attracted the equivalent of roughly two weeks of combined regular-season attendance across Australia's major professional sporting codes, including AFL, NRL, Super Netball, A-League, Super Rugby and men's and women's Big Bash cricket.

Australia has lost sight of the structural conditions that once allowed its stories to thrive. Over the past 17 years, production volume has grown, but audience engagement has sharply declined. The national policy framework prioritises employment and production expenditure at the expense of release pathways, genre balance and audience alignment. The result has been a widening gap between the films Australia makes and the films Australians actually watch.

Films are designed for the biggest screens and, where appropriate, should premiere there first. Theatrical performance remains the primary signal by which films establish

value internationally, shaping sales across multiple territories. Domestically, it continues to govern downstream revenue across transactional video on demand, subscription platforms, broadcast television and other secondary markets, as well as the scale of those returns. While intellectual property can generate value for years, for most films conceived with genuine theatrical intent that value is anchored in how and where audiences first encounter them.

Sending such films directly into the digital marketplace with little fanfare is rarely neutral. It weakens audience discovery, compresses revenue potential and diminishes long-term value. For public funders, it represents a poor return on investment. For the market, it is commercially suboptimal. For audiences, it is culturally thinning.

This does not deny that some works are rightly designed for direct-to-digital release and can thrive there. But for the majority of films conceived for cinema, bypassing theatrical exhibition is not an alternative pathway. It is an abandonment of the mechanism that allows value, audience and cultural impact to compound.

Made, Not Seen revisits the data, history and incentives that shape the Australian film sector. It asks whether a system designed to protect filmmaking has forgotten the audience that should be at its centre. Film production in Australia is heavily subsidised by taxpayer funding, and the public should reasonably expect corresponding public benefit. The report also asks whether reconnecting policy with the cultural logic first articulated in the Harvester Judgment may be key to rebuilding a vibrant national cinema.

Australia produces between 30 and 40 fictional feature films per year, a figure well below comparable countries. With the exception of some low-budget or so-called “credit card” productions, most are substantially subsidised by federal and state governments. Federal public funding is delivered through two principal mechanisms.

The national agency Screen Australia provides discretionary investment of up to $2 million per film, alongside modest grants. Competition for this support is vigorous. Of the films that entered production in the 2024–25 financial year, Screen Australia supported 12 out of 34. Most of those projects would also have accessed the Producer Offset. Together, the two forms of support cannot exceed 65 per cent of a film’s total budget.

The Producer Offset is a non-discretionary tax rebate. Provided eligibility conditions are met, producers receive a rebate of up to 40 per cent of qualifying Australian production expenditure (QAPE). While not all costs are claimable, most production expenditure qualifies, subject to a minimum threshold of $500,000.

In nearly all cases, films must be partnered with a local distributor to secure Screen Australia investment in advance. Distributor attachment is also effectively required for the Producer Offset, which can only be claimed once a film is completed. The distributor

guarantees theatrical release. Australian distributors include companies such as Madman and Roadshow, alongside Hollywood studios including Sony.

Some may argue that Screen Australia should be assessed only on the performance of films in which it has made a direct investment, rather than on the broader Australian theatrical slate. It is true that not all films included in this analysis received agency funding; many were financed through private investment, offset-only structures or low-budget production models. However, public money does not cease to be public simply because it is delivered through a tax offset rather than a direct grant. Under the Screen Australia Act 2008, the agency's statutory functions extend beyond individual project investment to the health and performance of the Australian screen sector, including promotion, distribution and ensuring access to Australian programs. Irrespective of funding pathway, all Australian feature films enter the same theatrical marketplace shaped by national policy settings, incentives and regulatory design. It is therefore appropriate to assess outcomes across the full Australian theatrical slate when evaluating whether those settings are delivering audiences and public value.

Despite being the point at which films meet their audiences, cinema exhibition and audience access sit largely outside Australia's national screen policy settings and reporting frameworks, leaving the final link between public investment and public experience effectively invisible.

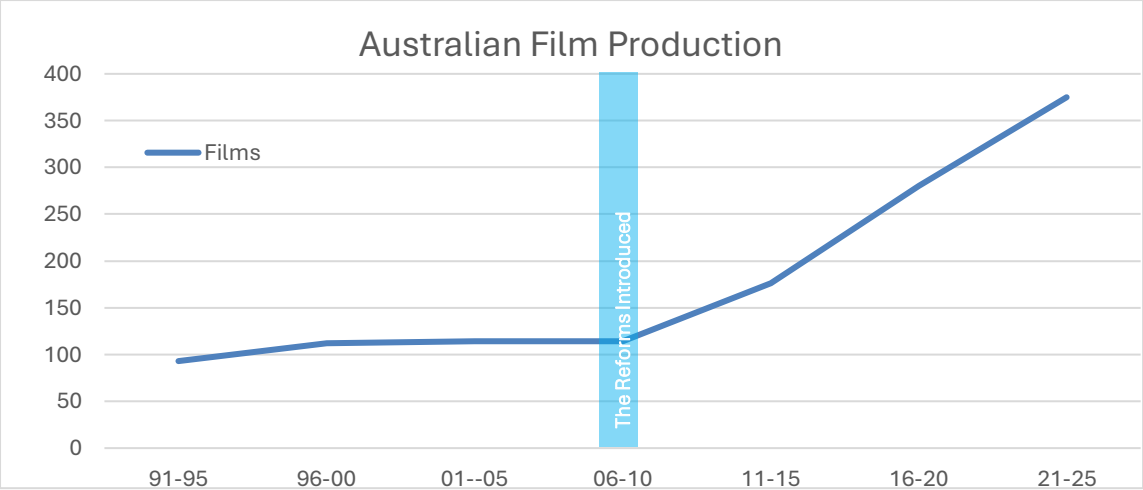
Analysis shows that the reforms are structurally misaligned with the modern Australian audience. Success continues to be measured primarily through production volume, expenditure and employment inputs, while audience outcomes, access, diversity and market readiness are treated as secondary or not measured at all. This argument is not a restatement of the Harvester Judgment, but it is informed by the same underlying principle: when a public outcome is socially valued, policy design must address structural conditions rather than relying on market outcomes alone.

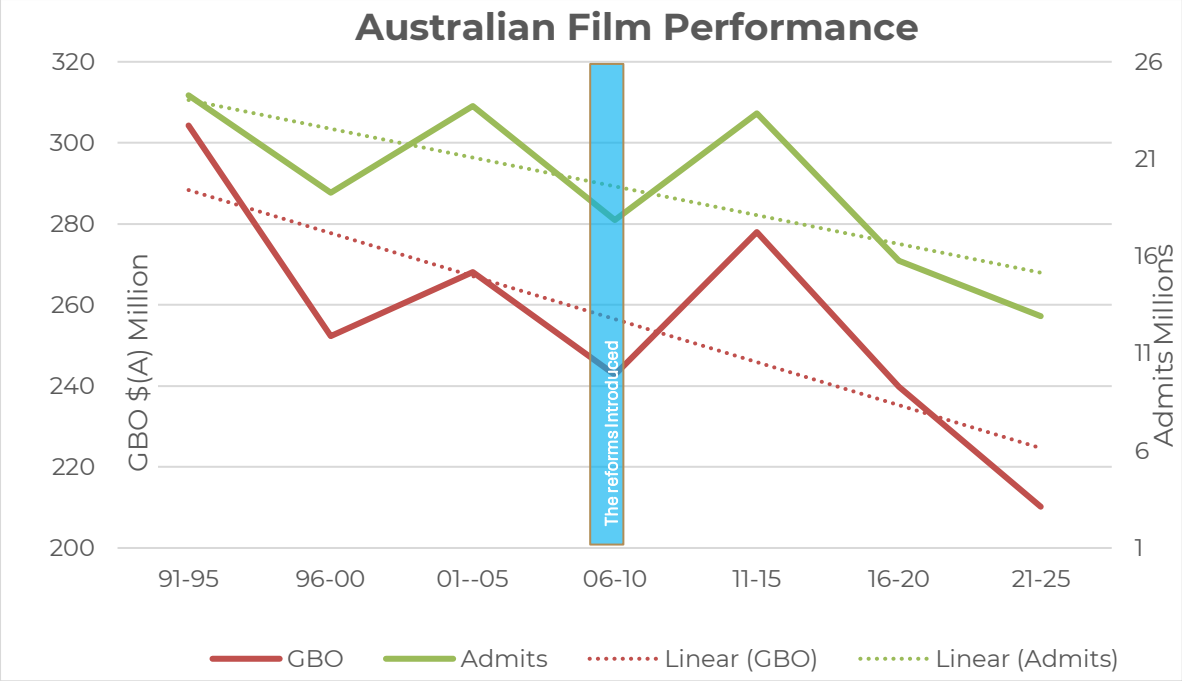
Before and after the reforms			
Australian Films	Pre-reform	Post-reform	Change
Films	390	903	132%
GBO	$949,126,586	$919,498,231	-3%
Admits	65,015,077	60,957,373	-6%
GBO/Film	$2,433,658	$1,018,270	-58%
Admissions/Film	166,705	67,505	-60%
Tix sold/100 people	19.9	14.6	-26%
Years	17	17	-

Gross box office (GBO) adjusted for inflation 2025 ($A). Population adjusted for Australian population change.

Data Sources: Numero, ABS and RBA

Together, these data show that Australia's screen policy settings have succeeded in expanding production activity but have failed to sustain audience reach. More films are being made, but fewer Australians are seeing them. The chapters that follow examine how this disconnect emerged, why it persists, and what structural reforms are required to reconnect Australian films with Australian audiences.





Part Two is an argument for making films that reach Australians, and for rebuilding the systems that once allowed them to.

CHAPTER 1
Report One Recap: Language and Audience Diversity

"Qualunque cosa farai, amala."
Whatever you end up doing, love it
— Cinema Paradiso

1.1 Part One

Part One of this series, *Australia's Audiences Speak Many Languages — But Its Screens Don't (Yet)*, examined all films released theatrically in Australia between January 2021 and August 2025 and established the cultural context for Part Two. Its central findings were clear.

Australia is a multilingual nation with monocultural screens.

One in five Australians speaks a language other than English at home. In many metropolitan and growth-corridor communities, that share rises to 35 to 55 per cent. Blacktown and Parramatta in Sydney, and Casey, Wyndham and Brimbank in Melbourne, are not anomalies. They are contemporary Australia. Yet fewer than one in 20 Australian films contains meaningful non-English dialogue.

The picture is worse again when viewed through a First Nations lens, which is itself depressingly familiar in Australian public life. We have managed to repeat this failure in culture as faithfully as we have repeated it elsewhere. First Nations Australians make up 3.2 per cent of the population, yet only 1.3 per cent of Australian theatrical films in the sample contained an Indigenous language component.

Author's Note: Having looked at New Zealand for comparison for the first report I thought I would check in with our Commonwealth cousins up north. The industry unit at the Toronto International Film Festival provided me with a breakdown of Canadian Films In French or English, Indigenous Languages and Others It was like being checked by Wayne Gretzky and these are just the films selected for TIFF.

Canadian Films Screening at TIFF including shorts

Year	English & French	Indigenous	Other	Total
2021	31	4	12	47
2022	58	4	22	84
2023	50	3	11	64
2024	54	7	17	78
2025	59	5	18	82

Year	English& French	Indigenous	Other	Total
2021	66%	9%	26%	100%
2022	69%	5%	26%	100%
2023	78%	5%	17%	100%
2024	69%	9%	22%	100%
2025	72%	6%	22%	100%

There may be a better way of doing this, eh?

Data supplied by the Industry Unit – Toronto International Film Festival: Programmed Canadian Films by main language group 2021 -25

The Rise of India Cinema

Indian cinema, in particular, has grown dramatically: outperforming Australian films across 2023 to 2025 in your report's framing, delivering stronger admissions per film, and benefiting from clear genre signals, strong marketing readiness and cultural alignment. These films do not succeed because

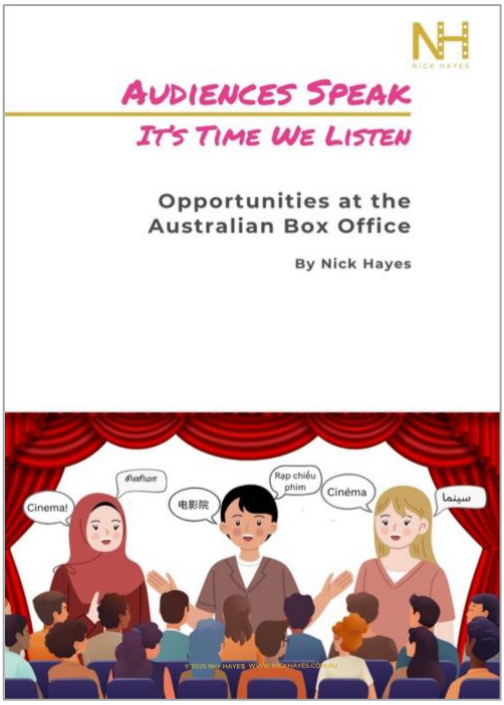
Australian films fail. They succeed because they are supplied consistently, marketed clearly and allowed to meet the audiences waiting for them.

The takeaway for Part Two

Language and cultural alignment remain outside Australia's funding logic. Part Two does not repeat the detailed analysis of Part One. It treats cultural alignment as a structural requirement and carries those findings into the recommendations that follow.

Australia's audience is modern, multicultural and cinematically literate.

Our system is not.



Figures1.1-4 Report 1 and associated coverage

CHAPTER 2

What We Make and Who It Reaches

"We live in a society."
— Network

This chapter examines the types of films Australia produces and who those films are structurally able to reach. It analyses genre concentration, classification outcomes and release patterns, and shows how upstream policy design narrows audience access long before questions of quality, marketing or taste arise.

2.1 Author's Note: On Peter Rabbit and Other Australian Miracles

If Hollywood were to make a genuinely Australian version of Peter Rabbit, we know how it would end. The CSIRO would release a highly targeted biological control with a 99 per cent efficacy rate, native vegetation would quietly reclaim a long-parched inland Australia, and the rabbit problem would be resolved with clinical efficiency. (The landscape recovery leaves several Australian productions suddenly short of the desolation their scripts depend on. That, however, is a story for someone else to tell.)

Large-scale global films are included in this analysis where creative authorship and narrative origin are Australian, even when financing and local distribution are studio-led. Global franchise titles that utilise Australia primarily as a production base are excluded and retained within the Hollywood cohort for completeness.

Readers who disagree are warmly invited to construct their own dataset, defend the Rabbit (and Mortal Kombat), and advance an alternative interpretation. The data presented here stands on its own terms.

2.2 Mind the Genre Gap

The core finding is straightforward. Australian production is highly concentrated in drama and documentary, while the genres that dominate theatrical box office overall remain structurally under-supplied. Where Australian films do operate in audience-aligned genres such as comedy, thriller, horror and family, performance is broadly proportional to output. This indicates latent demand rather than audience rejection.

Australian and All Films by Genre (2021 to 2025)			
Genre	All GBO %	AU GBO %	Genre Rep Index (GRI)
Action	43.8%	5.2%	0.12×
Adventure	16.3%	—	—
Animation	7.3%	1.6%	0.22×
Comedy	6.4%	7.6%	1.19×
Drama	6.2%	44.8%	7.2×
Thriller	4.6%	5.6%	1.22×
Horror	3.9%	3.7%	0.95×
Sci-Fi / Fantasy	3.4%	1.4%	0.41×
Family	3.0%	3.9%	1.30×
Documentary*	~1–2%	11.9%	Structural (Cultural) outlier

Figure 2.1 Australian production is highly concentrated in drama and documentary, while genres that dominate theatrical box office—action, adventure and animation—remain structurally under-supplied. Where Australian films do operate in audience-aligned genres such as comedy,

Over the past five years, action, adventure and animation have accounted for the majority of total box office revenue in the Australian theatrical market. These genres are capital-intensive, scale-dependent and structurally advantaged within global studio systems. Australian films are not absent from these categories because audiences reject them, but because the local production ecosystem rarely supports them at scale. Their scarcity is upstream and structural, not downstream and cultural.

By contrast, Australian production is heavily weighted toward drama and documentary. Together, these genres constitute the creative centre of national production and reflect long-standing cultural and policy priorities. However, they account for a relatively small share of total theatrical revenue. This does not render them failures. Documentary in particular functions as a form of cultural stewardship, supported by explicit public objectives that extend beyond box office performance. Its prominence should be understood as intentional rather than anomalous.

The consequence of this concentration is not simply a commercial shortfall. When local production clusters within a narrow dramatic range, the capacity of national cinema to reflect the full diversity of Australian life is constrained. Genre is not merely a storytelling choice. It is a signalling mechanism that shapes audience expectation, marketing clarity, session density and persistence over time.

Where Australian films are genre-clear and professionally positioned, outcomes improve markedly. Horror and thriller titles consistently perform at or above their proportional share of output. Family films, when produced and released with

confidence, demonstrate strong audience response relative to their scarcity. Comedy performs robustly when tonal clarity and marketing alignment are present. These are not marginal results. They indicate that the system's under-delivery in these areas is a missed opportunity rather than a structural impossibility.

2.3 Check the Classification

Classification patterns reinforce this finding. Australian theatrical releases are disproportionately concentrated in M and MA15+ ratings, while G and PG titles remain under-represented relative to the broader market. Classification functions as an access gate. G and PG ratings determine whether a film can be marketed and programmed for families, younger viewers and intergenerational audiences, particularly during school holiday and daytime sessions. When local production under-supplies films with these classifications, the audience ceiling is lowered before marketing, word of mouth or critical response have the opportunity to operate.

Classification Board Decisions 2021-2025				
Rating	All Films (%)	Australian Films (%)	Var (pp)	Comment on Australian Films
EX	20.9	13.4	–7.5	Less exempt / event content
G	3.4	4.5	1.1	Slightly higher
PG	17.7	10.3	–7.4	Fewer family titles
M	32.7	33.4	+0.7	Broadly aligned
MA15+	22.3	35.3	+13.0	Strong skew to adult drama
R18+	1.5	1.2	–0.3	Broadly aligned
TBC	1.3	1.0	–0.3	Minimal impact

Source: Numero Australia (2021–2025) and Australian Government Classification Branch, National Classification Database.

In other respects, Australian classification outcomes broadly mirror the wider market. R18+ content remains minimal, and most local films seek full classification in order to support theatrical, broadcast and platform circulation. The skew is not toward extremity, but toward adult-oriented dramatic material. This reflects upstream incentive structures and risk settings rather than an absence of creative capability.

Note on classification and audience reach:
Under the Australian Classification Scheme, **G** and **PG** classifications are intended for general and family audiences, including children and intergenerational viewing. **M** is advisory and generally targets mature audiences aged 15+, while **MA15+** legally restricts younger viewers. In practical theatrical terms, **G** and **PG** ratings determine whether a film can be marketed, programmed and attended as a family or youth outing, particularly during school holidays and daytime sessions.
(Source: Australian Government Classification Branch)

Taken together, the genre and classification data reinforce a central conclusion of this report. Structural design, not audience disinterest, limits who Australian films can reach theatrically. The system does not consistently support the kinds of films that align with broad audience behaviour, nor does it adequately reward those that succeed in reaching audiences when given access.

This is not an argument for abandoning cultural ambition or attempting to replicate Hollywood scale. Certain genres, particularly effects-driven action films, are structurally advantaged in global studio markets and sit beyond local budget realities. Australian cinema operates under different constraints, and success must be defined accordingly.

The question posed here is more modest and more practical. Can the system be redesigned to support a broader range of audience-aligned work within local economic limits. Where Australian films in family, youth, comedy, animation and genre cinema have been properly developed, marketed and released, audiences have responded. Their relative absence from the slate reflects incentive settings and approval logic, not a lack of talent or appetite.

2.4 Producers must read the tea leaves

Genre Representation

Total Market vs Australian Films 2021–2025

Rank	Genre	Titles (All)	GBO %	Genre (AU)	Titles (AU)	AU GBO %	Variance (pp)
1	Action	422	43.8%	Drama	103	44.8%	+38.6
2	Adventure	238	16.3%	Documentary	81	11.9%	–4.4
3	Animation	121	7.3%	Comedy	29	7.6%	+1.2
4	Comedy	198	6.4%	Thriller	18	5.6%	+1.0
5	Drama	812	6.2%	Action	12	5.2%	–38.6
6	Thriller	186	4.6%	Family	10	3.9%	+0.9
7	Horror	143	3.9%	Horror	9	3.7%	–0.2
8	Sci-Fi / Fantasy	104	3.4%	Romance / Other	7	2.6%	–0.8
9	Family	69	3.0%	Animation	3	1.6%	–5.7

Australian producers are too often expected to infer policy priorities from tone, trend and institutional mood rather than being given clear strategic direction. Where the evidence points to structural under-supply, whether in family films, youth-oriented work, animation, comedy or culturally aligned storytelling, that need is rarely stated with

enough clarity to shape behaviour confidently. Instead, producers are left to read soft signals, shifting language and the preferences of individual assessors.

This is a poor way to run a publicly supported screen system.

If the national slate is structurally thin in particular genres, classifications or audience pathways, policy should say so directly. Producers should not have to reverse-engineer strategic intent from lukewarm guidance. They should be told plainly where the gaps are and invited to meet them. A system that knows it is under-supplying children's films, family films, youth titles and broadly accessible local work should not behave as though this remains a matter of mystery or taste.

Clarity would not diminish creative freedom. It would improve strategic honesty. It would allow producers to make informed decisions about development risk, finance pathways, audience positioning and release logic. It would also make the relationship between public investment and public purpose more transparent. At present, too much of the burden sits with producers to guess what the system wants, while the system avoids stating clearly what the market and the evidence already show.

Strengthening investment in family and animated storytelling, supported by classification incentives and accessible release pathways, could help close the loop between creative intent and broad audience engagement.

Key Genres in Context
Australian Films 2021–2025

Metric	Drama	Docs	Horror	Family	Animated	Others	Australian Films	Total All Films
Titles	103	81	9	10	3	110	316	3,343
Share of AU Releases	33%	26%	3%	3%	1%	35%	100%	—
Gross Box Office (A$) M	$84.6	$22.4	$7.0	$7.4	$3.0	$188.9	$188.9	$4.09B
Share of AU GBO	44.8%	11.9%	3.7%	3.9%	1.6%	4.6	100%	—
Share of Total GBO	2.07 %	0.55%	0.17%	0.18%	0.07%	0.6	4.60%	100%
Ave. GBO per Title (A$)	$0.82M	$0.275M	$0.7M	$0.74M	$1.0M	0.60M	$0.60 M	—

Australian filmmaking is difficult, as it is everywhere. Every film must earn its audience by being compelling, emotionally truthful and culturally resonant. But quality alone cannot overcome structural barriers. Neither taste nor word of mouth can operate where access, timing, market readiness and audience fit are weak.

Timing is not a secondary consideration. It is where many Australian films quietly succeed or fail before audiences ever have the chance to choose them. Release dates, festival pathways and premiere logic now operate less as discovery mechanisms than as filters, concentrating attention on a small number of titles while consigning others to structurally invisible launches.

By the time a film reaches a cinema, its commercial fate is often already sealed. Chapter 3 examines how that happens, and why a system designed to celebrate films has instead become one of the most powerful mechanisms limiting their audience reach.

2.5 Bluey, and I accept that I'm going to cry

Bluey and the Big Screen Gap

While Australian animation for the cinema has struggled to find a foothold, television tells a different story. ***Bluey,*** produced by Ludo Studio, has become an international phenomenon, recording over **25 billion minutes of global lifetime viewing** in early 2025. Its success demonstrates that Australian animation can connect with audiences worldwide when the creative vision and commercial pathway align.

The absence of locally produced theatrical animation highlights a clear opportunity. With targeted investment and development, that success could translate to the big screen. Encouragingly, ***Bluey: The Movie***, a collaboration between ***Ludo Studio***, ***BBC Studios*** and ***Disney***, written and directed by creator Joe Brumm, is scheduled for release on 5 August 2027. The feature will bring the Heeler family to cinemas for the first time and stands as a rare and welcome moment of anticipation for Australian animation

CHAPTER 3

Data, Dating and Festivals

"Deidre Chambers, what a coincidence!."
— Muriel's Wedding

3.1 Aussie Films Miss Their Audience Before Marketing Begins

When the Australian theatrical dataset was rebuilt back to 1990 and adjusted for inflation and population growth, an unavoidable message emerged:

In the years since the creation of Screen Australia and the introduction of the Producers Offset and associated reforms, Australia has:

- **Doubled production**
- **Halved attendance.**

No other finding, directly from the data and included in this report, is as clear or as consequential.

Since the period 2006-2010, the number of Australian films produced each year has increased sharply. Public investment has grown. Development activity has expanded. Yet audiences did not follow. Admissions per film have collapsed.

This is not a creative failure. It is not a marketing failure.

It is a structural failure that occurs before marketing even begins.

Two qualifications matter. First, global cinema attendance declined following the pandemic. Second, Australian box office highs and lows are affected by the presence or absence of US-financed Australian productions of scale including *Elvis* and the Mad Max franchise. These factors explain volatility, not trend. They do not account for the long-term collapse in audience reach per Australian film.

3.2 What Gets Counted, What Gets Missed

Australian cinema is not failing because audiences have turned away from local films. The evidence presented in Chapter 2 shows a consistent pattern of audience alignment where access, genre fit and release conditions allow it. The question this chapter addresses is therefore not one of taste or quality, but of measurement. What, precisely, does the screen system observe, record and reward, and what sits outside its field of vision.

Government statements and Screen Australia's official film and television screen reporting framework is primarily designed to account for production activity. It tracks projects funded, budgets expended and by whom, employment generated and titles completed. These measures are administratively necessary and financially defensible. But they are also insufficient for understanding how films function as cultural works encountered by audiences in shared spaces. In practice, production accounting has become a proxy for success, even where audience outcomes are weak, uneven or structurally constrained.

This distinction matters. A film can be fully funded, completed on time, acquitted without issue and counted as a success within official reporting, while simultaneously failing to reach a meaningful audience theatrically. Conversely, films that build audiences slowly, rely on extended discovery, or operate outside dominant release models, may register as marginal within production-led datasets despite demonstrating sustained cultural and commercial value. The system is not misreading these outcomes. It is not designed to see them.

What is measured shapes what is managed. When volume of production is prioritised over conditions of access, scale of release and persistence of engagement, they incentivise activity rather than impact. Films are delivered to the edge of the market, but little attention is paid to whether audiences can find them, return to them, or recognise them as offering a shared national cinema experience.

The genre and classification patterns identified in Chapter 2 are not accidental. They are the predictable outcome of a system that counts inputs more reliably than outcomes, and completion more reliably than visibility. Over time, this produces a cinema culture that is rich in intention but narrow in reach, where success is declared upstream and audience connection is treated as contingent rather than structural.

This chapter examines the limits of Australia's current reporting and measurement frameworks and clarifies what those frameworks can observe and what they cannot. It does not analyse market performance or audience behaviour directly. Instead, it identifies the boundaries of official measurement, and the blind spots these boundaries create.

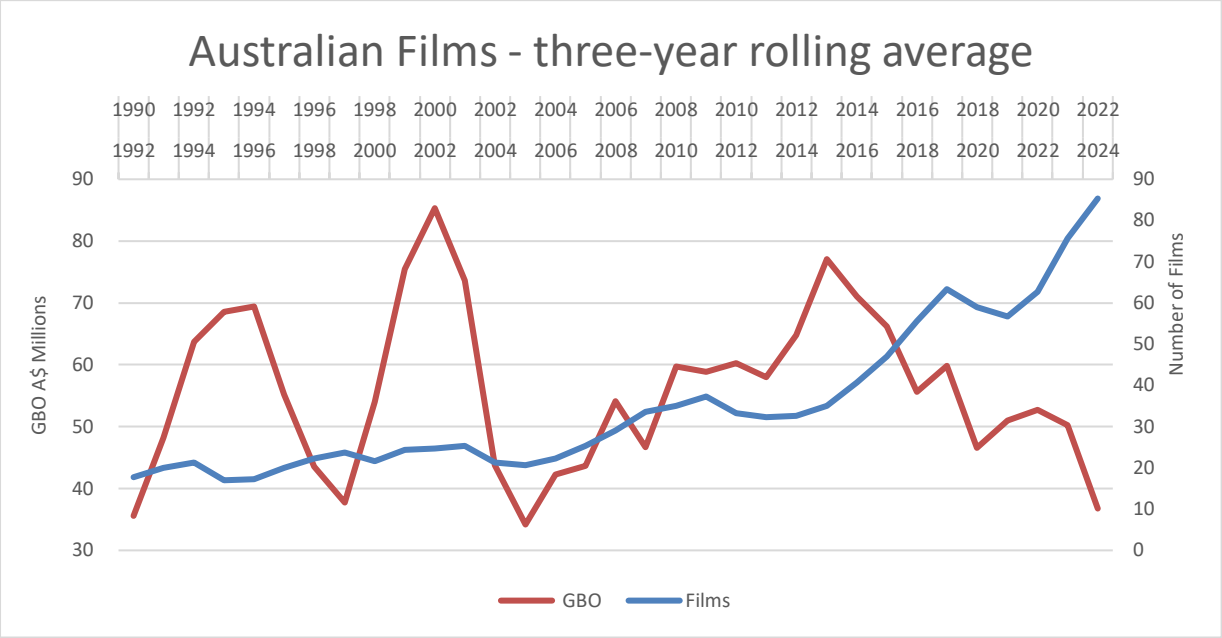


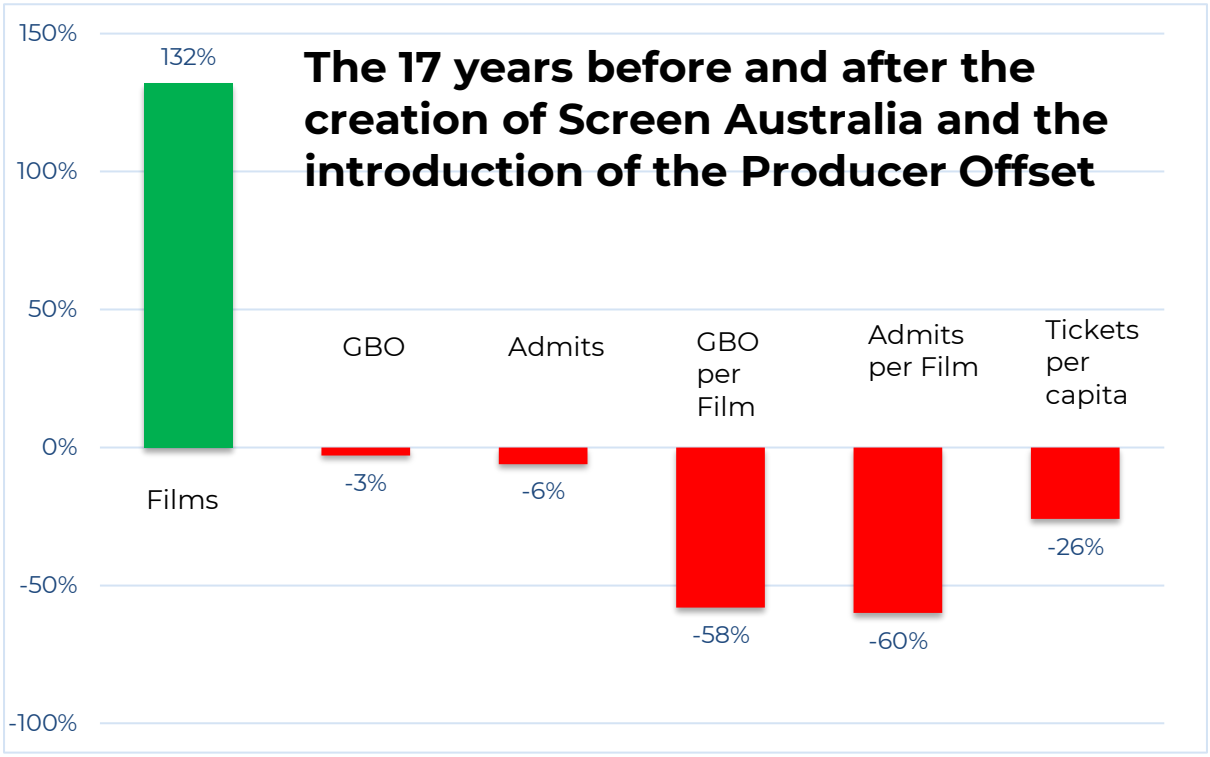
Figure 3.1 Three-year rolling average of Australian film box office and production volume.

3.3 The Inflection Point: 2008

The timing is not coincidental.

Around 2008, a series of structural changes occurred simultaneously:

- the creation of Screen Australia
- the introduction of the Producer Offset
- the exclusion of Exhibition and Audience Access from the core Screen Australia policy frame
- a growing emphasis on development-stage assessment over downstream audience readiness
- a weakening of the traditional early producer–distributor partnership
- the rise of platform-agnostic policy thinking
- the collapse of enforced marketing standards
- a drift away from audience strategy and release discipline

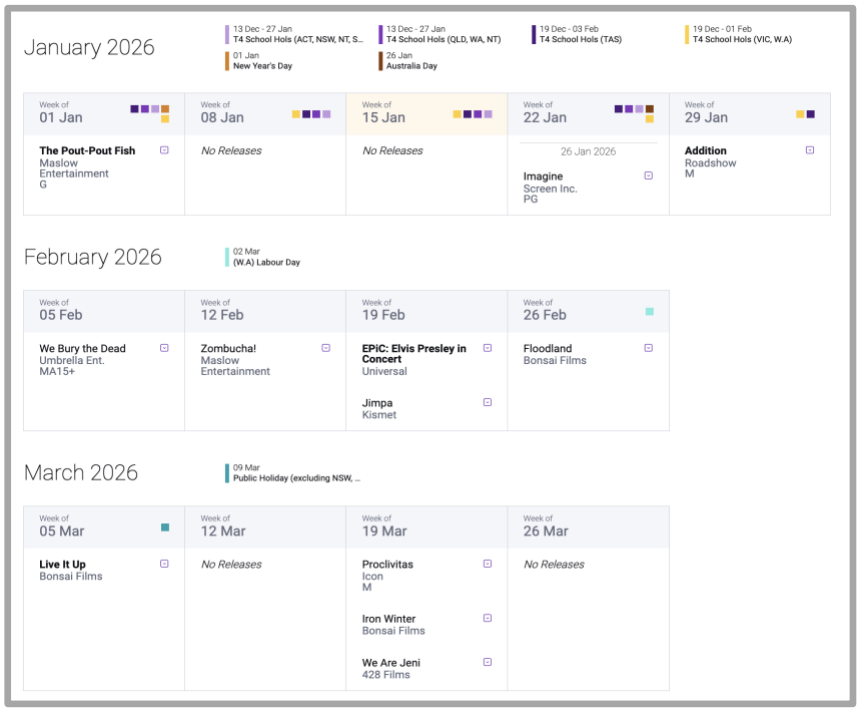


Note: Not all Australian films receive direct Screen Australia funding. But through the Producer Offset and its sector-wide role, Screen Australia's settings shape the broader feature film system, including films it does not directly fund.

This is the inflection point

The data indicates a structural causal break timed with the 2007–08 reset. While multiple factors shaped the post-2008 environment, the reform package materially contributed to the collapse in audience reach per Australian film.

The system shifted from ensuring films were seen to assuming they would be.



The Australian Theatrical Release Calendar

3.4 The Dating Problem: Structural, Not Tactical

Below are two stories about release dating in Australia. The first sets out the theoretical and legally defensible reality. The second, officially speaking, never happened: nobody saw nothing, nobody knows nothing, and the release may as well not have existed, or at least not in the week it was originally meant to.

The Official Story

The problem is not volume.

The problem is timing.

Australian films are not failing because too many are released. They are failing because they are repeatedly released into the same constrained periods of the calendar, regardless of genre, audience or seasonal fit. This pattern predates individual titles, distributors and marketing decisions. It is systemic.

Release timing is a form of access. It determines who is available, how much attention is available, and how long a film has to find its audience before congestion intervenes.

Where timing is misaligned, marketing cannot compensate.

The Dating Problem: Macro, Not Micro

The problem is not volume. The problem is timing

JANUARY

(Will these holidays ever end?)

- Low Australian release volume
- Audiences remain in holiday mode
- High-attendance potential largely unused

The absence of Australian children's and family films in January is not a market failure. It reflects the absence of system-level planning and coordination. Children's cinema operates on generational timelines. Missed windows are not easily recovered, and repeated absence has long-term consequences for audience formation and cultural attachment.

FEBRUARY–MARCH

(It's Moria's favourite season — but for Australian films, a problem zone)

These months lack:

- No school holiday uplift, except in early Easter years
- Oscar-season attention dominated by prestige international titles
- Limited mainstream audience availability for local releases outside the awards conversation

These are months in which cinephile attention, media coverage and exhibitor focus are disproportionately drawn to the Oscar field and other prestige international releases. For Australian films, particularly those without awards heat or a sharply defined audience proposition, this creates a crowded and often unforgiving release corridor.

APRIL

(Easter avoidance — the bunny gets it)

- Easter school holidays routinely avoided by Australian releases
- High-attendance family window ceded to studio titles by default
- Australian films positioned as counterprogramming rather than primary choice

This avoidance is structural rather than strategic. Easter offers predictable audience uplift across families and adults, yet Australian films are rarely positioned to compete, reinforcing the assumption that premium windows are "not for us".

MAY–JUNE

(Viable months, rarely optimised)

- Moderate release volume
- Increasing competition for screens
- Inconsistent alignment between genre and season

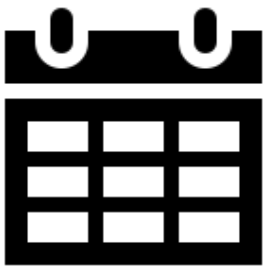
May–June can support Australian releases when timing, genre, and marketing are aligned. However, in the absence of national slate coordination, these months often function as spillover periods rather than planned opportunities, limiting cumulative impact.

JULY

(Winter warmer. Not for our kids.)

- Peak family attendance period
- Strong repeat visitation patterns
- Australian presence typically thin or absent

The July school holidays are among the most reliable cinema-going periods of the year. The limited presence of Australian children's and family films during this window compounds the January absence, further weakening generational continuity and early audience attachment.



AUGUST

(Inherited rules take over)

- MIFF exerts its full force
- Marketing activity often deferred
- Release planning subordinated to eligibility and prestige considerations

August increasingly functions as a holding pattern rather than a launch phase. Momentum generated through festival attention is frequently paused rather than converted, creating artificial gaps between awareness and availability.

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER

(Can't see through these woods)

- High concentration of Australian releases
- Multiple films targeting the same adult audience
- Severe cannibalisation of attention, screens, and marketing oxygen

Rather than benefiting from collective visibility, Australian films crowd each other out. Runs shorten, marketing impact compresses, and audience discovery is truncated before it can compound.

NOVEMBER

(A broken bridge)

- Historically a transition into summer release
- Loss of reliable festival anchoring in some jurisdictions
- Inconsistent industry signalling

Where stabilising infrastructure has eroded, November now delivers uneven outcomes, with releases entering uncertainty rather than momentum.

DECEMBER

(High-attendance, low Australian presence)

- Peak cinema-going period
- Strong family and intergenerational attendance
- Australian films largely absent

December remains dominated by studio releases, despite its proven capacity to sustain long theatrical runs and broad audiences. The absence of Australian films during this period reinforces the perception that national cinema sits outside when and where audiences most want to gather.

Wogs Outta Work, Dates Outta Whack

For many years, Australia's release calendar was not governed only by distributor ambition or studio pressure. It was also shaped by a quieter form of market discipline exercised by a small number of senior exhibition figures who understood that if too many major titles were pushed into the same corridor, everyone lost. Gino at Village and Frank at Hoyts were central to that culture. Event, through its various alignments with Village, broadly moved within the same gravitational field. Nobody was foolish about legal boundaries, and nobody would have described the arrangement in formal terms, but in practice there was a degree of stewardship that helped keep the Australian calendar more orderly than it otherwise would have been. Big films were more sensibly spaced. Weekends had room to breathe. The punter got a better run.

That discipline weakened when Frank left Hoyts. Without the same alignment at the top of the market, the old centre of gravity began to dissolve. When Gino also left, the industry lost a man of deep conviction about how the business should be run. Whatever anyone thinks of the old order, the calendar has never been quite as coherent since. That Gino remained someone distributors still called for dating advice, even after his departure, says a great deal about the regard in which he was held. He belonged to an older tradition in the industry: instinctive, commercial, tough-minded, not always tidy in method perhaps, but grounded in a real understanding of how the whole market fitted together.

On a personal level, my affection for both men is real. Frank was my very first boss at Hoyts. When I was made redundant after 15 years at Dendy and Icon, two of the first calls I received were from Frank and Gino. Both had been through that same kind of rupture with long-term employers. Both told me it would hurt, that I would be angry at first, and that in time it would get better. They were right. They came from that old-school generation, sons of post-war migrant families, men shaped by hard work, loyalty, instinct and sheer staying power. They were not polished in the modern corporate sense, nor were they meant to be. They were men of character, of conviction and of a particular time in Australian exhibition. Whatever else may be said, they helped hold the business together.

Summary Observation

Across the calendar, Australian films are repeatedly released into periods of low audience availability, high congestion, or deliberate avoidance of peak windows. This pattern is not the result of isolated misjudgements. It reflects the absence of calendar authority, coordination and accountability for audience outcomes.

Release timing now defaults to individual distributors operating without enforceable marketing standards, usable assets, or national slate coordination. Festivals increasingly substitute for release strategy rather than functioning as pathways to audiences.

No successful national cinema leaves release timing to chance.

Australia does.

Comparable markets treat release dating as an industry and policy function. France embeds discipline through exhibition policy. South Korea protects peak windows for domestic cinema. Germany aligns funding, school-holiday scheduling and exhibition incentives to reduce internal competition.

Australia once had Gino and Frank. It has no equivalent mechanism now.

Figure 3.2 — Australian Theatrical Release Concentration by Month, 1990–2025

Australian Theatrical Releases 1990 - 2025													
Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Year
1990			2				1	2	1	1	1	3	11
1991	1	1	2	3	1			1	2	2	2	1	16
1992	2	1	4	2	2		1	4	4	2	3	1	26
1993	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	3	4	1		18
1994		1	2	1	1	2	4	1	3	4		1	20
1995		1		1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	13
1996		1	1		1		1	4	4	3	1	3	19
1997	1	2	1	3	5	1	2	1	5	1	3	3	28
1998	1		1	1	3		1	6	2	3	1	1	20
1999		1	2	3		2	3	2	2	3	2	3	23
2000		1	2	2	5		1	4	1	2	1	3	22
2001	1		2	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	4	1	28
2002		1		1	3		2	6	5	5	1		24
2003		1	4	1	4		2	3	4	2	2	1	24
2004	1	2	2	2	1		1	3	2		2		16
2005	1		5	3	2	2		1	2	3	2	1	22
2006				1	1	2	3	6	5	6	4	1	29
2007			2	2	2	1	3	4	5		5	1	25
2008		1	3	3	2	2	4	2	3	6	7		33
2009		1	5	2	8	4	5	4	6	5	2	1	43
2010	1	2	1	3	5	2	3	3	4	3	2		29
2011		2	4	1	2	5	3	4	2	6	7	4	40
2012	1	4	2	1	2	1	4	2	3	5	5	1	31
2013		1	2	1	2	1		5	3	5	5	1	26
2014	2	1	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	7	4	4	41
2015	1	2	3	2	2	1	3	5	8	6	4	1	38
2016	2	1	4	7	2	3	1	4	4	6	4	5	43
2017	2	2	8	7	6	3	3	6	12	6	4	1	60
2018	2	7	7	4	6	4	3	8	5	10	6	2	64
2019	2	3	6	3	10	2	3	5	7	11	7	7	66
2020	5	8	4			3	2	5	3	7	5	5	47
2021	7	5	7	5	4	6	1	1	10	3	5	3	57
2022	2	5	13	6	10	5	6	7	7	8	7	8	84
2023	4	6	6	4	9	7	4	6	7	16	14	3	86
2024	2	7	4	5	7	7	9	9	8	14	11	3	86
2025	1	5	10	2	9	3	4	4	4	11	10	3	66
Total Month	43	77	126	89	128	76	92	136	153	182	145	77	1322
Release Index	0.37	0.67	1.09	0.77	1.11	0.66	0.80	1.18	1.32	1.58	1.26	0.67	

Figure 3.3 The distribution of Australian theatrical releases across the calendar year is highly uneven. Across 35 years, local films cluster disproportionately in the second half of the year, particularly from August to November, with October peaking at 1.67 times the expected monthly volume, while January and December are consistently avoided.

3.5 The Festival Distortion Effect

September–October: The post-festival congestion

This imbalance is not accidental. September and October have become structural congestion points for Australian films, driven in significant part by the gravitational pull of the Melbourne International Film Festival.

Its publicity, eligibility and premiere conventions, largely inherited from a pre-digital era, continue to discourage proximity between festival exposure and theatrical release.

The consequences are repeated year after year:

- films delay release to protect festival eligibility or prestige positioning
- marketing activity is paused or fragmented rather than activated
- momentum generated during the festival period is deliberately stalled rather than converted
- titles then spill into September and October in concentrated waves

Internationally, major festivals increasingly function as launch ramps. In Australia, the effect is often the opposite. The result is predictable: October congestion, Australian films competing directly with each other, audience awareness dissipating rather than compounding, and marketing assets ageing before deployment.

Festivals do important work in championing Australian cinema, and that value is real. But under current settings they can also unintentionally constrain films' visibility and commercial viability.

This distortion is not inherent to festivals themselves. As demonstrated elsewhere in this chapter, where governance, publicity rules and distributor collaboration are modernised, festivals can operate as effective launch platforms rather than release bottlenecks.

November: Collapse, then partial correction

Historically, November functioned as a stabilising bridge in the Australian release calendar. Anchored by the Adelaide Film Festival and the Brisbane International Film Festival, it provided continuity between festival exposure and the summer theatrical season.

That ecosystem fractured.

Brisbane: Lost its Punch

The Queensland Government's decision to remove operation of BIFF from Screen Queensland and place it into a rolling events tender every three years produced a predictable outcome. Continuity was lost. Industry signalling weakened. November's stabilising role collapsed.

Top-tier film festivals are not merely events to be procured, rebranded or rotated through an administrative cycle. At their best, they are institutions. They accumulate curatorial memory, industry trust, audience habit and an evolving knowledge of both cinema as an art form and the specific place in which they operate. They do not simply fill dates on a calendar. They help shape the cultural meaning of a city, signal seriousness to the industry, and provide continuity between filmmakers, audiences and the marketplace. When policy treats such institutions as interchangeable events, it does not create healthy competition. It strips away memory, weakens identity and destabilises the very calendar infrastructure on which films depend.

This was not a failure of individual festivals, but of policy design. Calendar infrastructure cannot function without institutional stability.

Adelaide: Stability restores calendar function

Under the stable leadership of prodigal son of the Murray plains, Mat Kesting, and with a clear institutional mandate, the Adelaide Film Festival has re-established itself as a functional calendar anchor.

Adelaide now operates as:

- a credible international festival
- an integrated industry platform
- a supporter of local production through aligned funding mechanisms
- a stabilising presence in the national release calendar

Crucially, Adelaide demonstrates that festivals can support Australian cinema without distorting release timing. Its settings allow festival visibility to convert into theatrical momentum rather than delaying access in pursuit of prestige.

This matters because it disproves the argument that congestion and calendar dysfunction are inevitable. Where governance is stable and incentives are aligned, festivals strengthen audience access rather than suppress it.

Sydney: From endpoint to launch platform

The Sydney Film Festival provides a second, and distinct, counterexample.

Once constrained in a 35mm world by proximity to Cannes and the old tyranny of distance, Sydney has actively modernised its operating settings to take advantage of a digital era. Under festival director Nashen Moodley, who combines charm, tenacity and strategy with a travel and viewing schedule that can only be described as inhumane, the festival has updated its publicity rules, rebuilt trust with distributors and worked actively with exhibitors to reposition itself as a launch platform rather than an endpoint.

Key shifts include:

- publicity and eligibility rules aligned with contemporary release cycles
- active coordination with distributors on timing and conversion
- flexibility around international premieres and proximity to theatrical release

Sydney demonstrates that festivals do not have to sit downstream of audience demand. With the right settings, they can operate as primary points of discovery within the national release ecosystem.

Cannes may remain cinema's high church, but it is in wet, wintery Sydney, among the huddled masses inside the State Theatre on Market Street, that the cinematic crème de la crème often begin their real encounter with a public audience.

Why these examples matter

Adelaide and Sydney do not succeed because they are exceptional cities. They succeed because their festivals are governed, funded and structured in ways that align prestige with access.

Their existence clarifies a central finding of this chapter: festival distortion is a policy choice, not a law of nature.

3.6 Festival Reform: From Symbolic to Structural Support

One of the few ways Screen Australia currently engages with exhibition is through general festival support.

That support is:

- small relative to state government investment
- administratively heavy
- disproportionate to its operational impact
- treated as discretionary rather than foundational

The acquittal process is burdensome, while sponsorship and branding requirements are out of scale with the funding provided.

This is a structural mismatch.

Festivals are not peripheral. They are core exhibition infrastructure.

By contrast, Creative Australia supports performing arts organisations through long-term, multi-year operational frameworks that recognise institutional significance while maintaining arm's-length decision-making. These organisations receive stability without being shielded from audience accountability. Government subsidy typically covers only a portion of operating costs, requiring organisations to generate diverse income streams while benefiting from predictable public support.

Screen Australia does not apply comparable logic to festivals, despite their central role in exhibition, audience access and the dissemination of Australian and film culture.

The consequence is predictable. Without stable governance, modernised rules and aligned incentives, festivals cease to function as audience infrastructure and instead distort the release ecosystem they are meant to support.

Further detailed recommendations regarding festivals are in the final chapters of this report

In the meantime, and in partnership with each relevant state screen agency, current festival funding should be rapidly reformed to:

- provide automatic operational funding
- simplify acquittals, with the published program guide accepted as the primary acquittal document, supported by streamlined financial reporting
- rebalance sponsorship expectations and reduce disproportionate branding and acknowledgment demands

Festivals are not marketing vehicles for the agency; they are delivery mechanisms for its mandate.

Prioritise release outcomes. Preference festivals that modernise publicity rules, collaborate with distributors, and convert momentum into theatrical access.

This is not largesse.

It is Screen Australia's duty.

Quietly.

CHAPTER 4
The Places We Gather

"It's not a house. It's a home."
— The Castle (1997)

Chapters 4 and 5 should be read together. Chapter 4 establishes where cinema access exists, where it is fragile, and where it has failed. Chapter 5 examines what that access enables within communities, and what is lost when it disappears. Together, they demonstrate that audience outcomes cannot be improved without first addressing physical access to cinemas.

Cinemas are gathering places and part of the civic and cultural infrastructure of the nation.

Over this chapter and the next, this report turns to cinemas as the places we gather. Cinemas are not merely places of discretionary leisure; they are part of the cultural infrastructure that shapes how communities meet, participate and share public life. Cinemas are the most widely attended cultural venues in Australia, yet their distribution, condition and viability are rarely examined through an infrastructure or equity lens. Where cinemas are present, they anchor suburban and regional centres, support night-time economies and provide predictable, shared points of civic activity. Where they are absent or have disappeared, communities lose more than entertainment; they lose access to a public space that connects people across age, income, political views and cultural backgrounds.

This chapter addresses the geography of cinema: where access exists, where it is fragile, and where it has failed altogether. It provides the spatial and evidentiary foundation for understanding why large and growing parts of the Australian population now live without reasonable access to their local cinema, and why access must be addressed before audience outcomes can be meaningfully improved. All films, including Australian films, are increasingly misaligned with population growth and demographic need. The resulting access gaps are not the product of declining demand or exhibitor resistance. They are the cumulative outcome of planning decisions that have treated cinemas as optional amenities rather than essential civic and cultural infrastructure.

Like Chapter 4, Chapter 5 draws directly on SA3 population data, socio-economic overlays, cinema location mapping, screen counts, admissions and gross box office performance. Read together, the chapters show that rebuilding Australian cinema audiences requires both physical access to places and alignment between films and the communities those places serve.

4.1 A Brief Historical Context

From the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, Australian cinema exhibition was dominated by large single-screen theatres embedded in town centres and high streets. This model began to fracture with the arrival of television in the mid-1950s, triggering the first major wave of cinema closures through the 1960s.

The 1960s and 1970s saw partial replacement through migrant-serving and foreign-language cinemas, particularly in communities with strong Greek, Italian and Yugoslav populations. Some surviving venues drifted into adult entertainment, reflecting the absence of a coherent cultural or planning framework for cinema retention.

The modern exhibition era emerged in the 1980s with the arrival of suburban multiplexes at centres such as Chadstone and Eastgardens. Exhibition consolidated into fewer, larger sites with more screens. The multi-projectionist craft disappeared, labour structures shifted, and cinema increasingly migrated from civic streets to retail complexes. This structural shift underpins the access challenges visible today.

4.2 The Contemporary Exhibition Landscape

In 2025, approximately 530 cinema venues appeared in public box-office reporting. That raw count overstates the number of physically distinct sites because Numero records some venues as separate lines where ownership or operator changes occurred during the year, and also includes temporary, irregular and non-commercial operations.

When normalised to remove duplicate reporting generated by operator change, 473 physically distinct venues comprising 2,266 screens generated approximately $970 million in gross box office. Within this total, 348 theatres operating 2,123 screens functioned as commercially active venues and generated approximately $956.9 million, including $18.3 million attributable to sites that changed operator during the year but continued trading as commercial cinemas.

A further 133 venues operating 165 screens functioned on a non-commercial or irregular basis and together accounted for $16.3 million in gross box office. These venues make an important cultural contribution, particularly in community, regional and event contexts. However, they do not constitute a substitute for a commercially viable exhibition network capable of sustaining habitual attendance, supporting film discovery, or providing national scale for theatrical circulation.

The contemporary Australian cinema market is therefore not only unevenly distributed, but highly concentrated in economic capacity. Revenue performance rises sharply with venue scale, and the median earning power of larger sites is materially higher than that of smaller-format cinemas.

Venue Scale Performance Summary 2025 *(Commercial & Active)*							
Venue scale	**Theatre Count**	**Total Screens**	**Average Screens**	**Median GBO** per theatre	**Average GBO** per theatre	**Median GBO** per screen	**Average GBO** per screen
Single	263	263	1.00	~$120k*	~$109k	~$120k	~$109k
Twin	48	96	2.00	$244k	$280k	$122k	$140k
Miniplex (3–4 Screens)	73	257	3.52	$729k	$767k	$207k	$218k
Midplex (5–7 screens)	91	531	5.84	$1.86m	$2.09m	$319k	$359k
Multiplex (8–11 Screens)	101	898	8.89	$3.29m	$3.77m	$370k	$424k
Megaplex (12+ Screens)	36	521	14.47	$7.64m	$7.94m	$528k	$548k

Two exceptional outliers, IMAX Sydney and IMAX Melbourne, are classified as single-screen venues but operate under economic conditions that are not comparable to the broader single-screen sector. Median values are therefore used throughout this analysis to avoid distortion from these ceiling-case venues and to preserve a representative view of underlying market performance.

The concentration pattern is clear. Multiplex and megaplex cinemas account for only 27.3 per cent of venues, or 129 sites, yet generate 68.6 per cent of total box office from 59 per cent of screens. By contrast, single and twin cinemas comprise 48.8 per cent of the national network but contribute only 8.1 per cent of gross box office despite accounting for 14.3 per cent of screens.

The implication is straightforward. In contemporary Australian exhibition, commercially decisive capacity sits overwhelmingly in larger multi-screen venues. This is a structural characteristic of the present exhibition economy, with direct consequences for release scale, programming flexibility, audience access and the practical reach of Australian films.

4.3 Access Failure: A Planning Problem, not a Market Problem

This is the systemic diagnosis of the chapter.

Australia's cinema access problem is not a simple case of market failure. It is the accumulated result of long-term urban planning decisions.

Since the 1980s, suburban growth has consistently prioritised big-box retail, car-dependent land use and short-term development yield over civic and cultural infrastructure. Cinemas migrated from high streets to retail complexes and, in many newer growth corridors, were never embedded at all.

The pattern is not anecdotal. It is spatially consistent.

Fast-growing outer-metropolitan corridors have expanded without proportional screen provision. Population growth has outpaced cinema access. Youth-heavy and linguistically diverse communities, the very demographics most likely to attend cinema when supply aligns with demand, are often the least served.

At the same time, inner-metropolitan areas, where population growth has generally been slower and cinema access historically entrenched, retain the highest concentration of screens per capita. The distribution is not neutral. It reflects where planning systems protected cultural uses and where they did not.

An equity gradient emerges clearly in the data. Lower-SES and outer-metropolitan communities have fewer viable screens per capita, shorter theatrical runs, and greater exposure to fragility and closure. Inner-metro areas are comparatively over-screened relative to recent population growth, while growth corridors remain under-provided despite demographic alignment with cinema attendance.

This is not the outcome of audience indifference. It is the predictable result of planning frameworks that treated cinemas as optional commercial tenants rather than essential civic infrastructure.

When cinemas are not explicitly required, safeguarded or incentivised in growth areas, they do not emerge organically.

That is not market failure.

It is planning failure.

4.4 Mapping the National Cinema Footprint

Every operating cinema, together with sites closed since 2017, has been mapped by latitude and longitude, postcode, ABS SA3 and SA4 geography, screen count, operator, and operational status, including active, fragile, dormant and closed.

Overlaying this footprint with population growth and socio-economic data produces three consistent findings.

Insight 1 — Cinema access gaps follow population growth

Outer-metropolitan growth corridors such as Wyndham, Casey, Blacktown, Liverpool and Ipswich show high population growth, younger demographics and strong cultural diversity, yet materially insufficient screen provision.

Insight 2 — Screen-rich areas remain concentrated in established inner and middle suburbs

Inner-metropolitan areas retain the highest concentration of screens per capita, while outer-suburban growth areas remain under-provided despite stronger demographic alignment with cinema attendance.

Insight 3 — Cultural alignment follows geography

Attendance patterns show strong geographic alignment between culturally diverse communities and non-English-language films, indicating latent demand where access and supply are aligned. Australian films rarely meet these conditions.

Taken together, these findings point to a structural mismatch between where cinemas are located, where population growth is occurring, and where future audience demand is strongest.

Cinema Access Is an Equity Issue

When cinema supply is measured not by legacy buildings but by commercially viable screens capable of sustained operation, a clear socio-economic gradient emerges. Lower-SES communities consistently have fewer viable screens per capita, shorter theatrical runs, and greater exposure to fragility and closure.

In many SA3s, cinema access has already disappeared despite population density theoretically sufficient to support a cinema. This is not a demand failure. It is structural.

Cinema remains Australia's most accessible out-of-home cultural activity. When viable cinemas disappear from lower-SES or regional communities, those audiences are not simply choosing alternative platforms. They are being structurally excluded from one of the country's most widely attended and socially shared cultural experiences.

When cinema access gaps are overlaid with socio-economic disadvantage, the pattern becomes harder to dismiss as a neutral market outcome. Weak or absent cinema provision is concentrated not only in regional areas, but also in lower-SES outer-metropolitan and growth-corridor communities, precisely where population is rising and access to shared cultural infrastructure is most needed.

This does not suggest that disadvantage by itself causes weak cinema access. Rather, it shows that existing access failures fall disproportionately on communities already carrying other forms of structural disadvantage. In policy terms, that matters. Where cinema provision is weak, absent or fragile in more disadvantaged areas, the loss is not merely commercial. It deepens an existing inequity in access to shared civic and cultural life.

The pattern is visible across several distinct geographies. In regional Australia, places such as Maryborough, Bundaberg, Gympie–Cooloola, Burnett, Clarence Valley and Taree–Gloucester combine weak cinema provision with relatively high disadvantage. In outer-metropolitan and growth-corridor Australia, the same pattern appears in places such as Merrylands–Guildford, Canterbury, Bringelly–Green Valley, Blacktown North, Casey North, Wyndham and Melton–Bacchus Marsh. These are not marginal populations. They are substantial and, in many cases, growing communities.

The equity implications are strongest where three conditions coincide: a large or growing population, weak or no commercially active cinema provision, and comparatively high socio-economic disadvantage. These are the places where the absence of cinema access is least defensible as a market outcome and most clearly exposed as a failure of planning and infrastructure provision.

Seen in this light, cinema access is not simply a question of entertainment supply. It is an equity issue.

Regional Decline as the Geography of Inequity

SA3 analysis reveals three recurring conditions across regional and outer-metropolitan Australia.

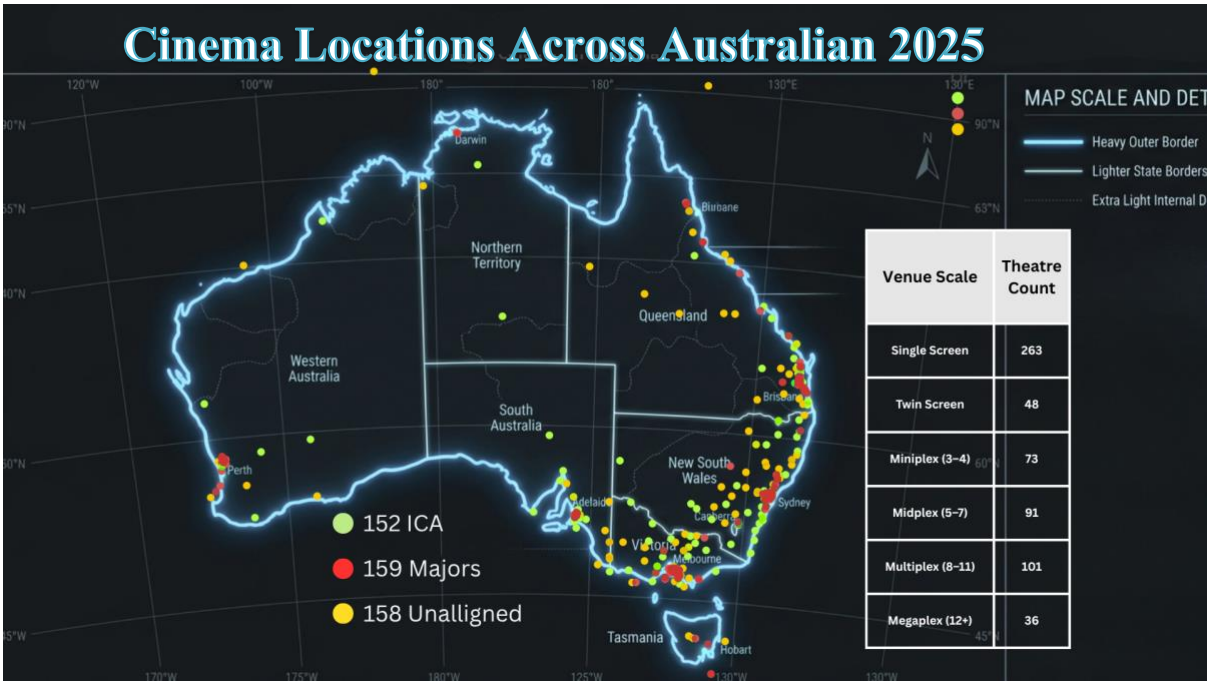
The first is total absence: substantial communities with no commercially viable cinema screens at all.

The second is critical under-provision: places where some screens remain, but at levels materially below any reasonable access benchmark.

The third is under-served provision: areas that retain functioning cinema access, but at levels below self-sustaining industry norms and below what their population size and demographic profile would warrant.

These conditions cluster disproportionately in lower-SES and regional areas. Regional decline is therefore not a separate problem. It is the geographic expression of an equity failure.

Detailed SA3 schedules of zero-access, critically under-served and under-served areas are included in the appendix. They are best read not as isolated local anomalies, but as part of a national pattern in which planning systems have failed to align cinema provision with population growth, social need and cultural participation.



4.4 When the Sun Rose Over Yarraville

The revival of the Sun Theatre is one of the clearest Australian examples of cinema functioning as a catalyst for urban renewal.

Rescued from dereliction in the mid-1990s by Anne and Michael Smith, the heritage Art Deco cinema sits on Ballarat Street in Yarraville, then a quiet local strip with a limited night-time economy. Its reopening as a community-centred cinema did not simply restore a building. It helped reactivate a precinct.

Over time, the cinema's steady foot traffic created the conditions for more cafés, bars and restaurants, many trading into the evening, a shift from car-dominated access to walkable, people-first streets, and the eventual pedestrianisation of Ballarat Street across multiple blocks. Yarraville Village became a destination rather than a pass-through suburb.

The cinema's growth mirrored the precinct's evolution. What began as monthly community screenings became a single-screen cinema, then a six-screen venue by 2008, and today eight-screen complex drawing audiences from across Melbourne's inner west. Each stage of expansion reinforced confidence in the local economy, supporting further private investment and hospitality growth.

Crucially, the Sun Theatre anchored repeat, predictable visitation. Unlike one-off events or fluctuating retail turnover, cinema generates reliable weekly attendance across age groups, weather conditions and seasons. That consistency helped underpin the case for outdoor dining, extended trading hours and public realm upgrades.

The lesson is structural. A well-run local cinema is not only a cultural asset. It is also economic infrastructure. The Sun Theatre demonstrates how exhibition can stabilise high streets, support small business density, extend the night-time economy and create places people actively choose to gather.

Yarraville did not grow around a shopping mall or a transport hub. It grew around a cinema.

Author's Note: Last December I was having dinner with Michael Smith on a cool early summer evening in Yarraville when a man in his early fifties, out walking with his partner and another couple, came over to our table. He apologised for interrupting and said, "You don't know me, but I just wanted to say thank you."

A slightly puzzled Michael asked, "For what?"

The man gestured broadly up and down Ballarat Street, taking in the now-pedestrianised blocks lined with restaurants, cafés, shops and people, and said, "For all this. Both my kids have jobs in restaurants here, and it's because of you."

Then he returned to his west side posse, having seized his moment to express a simple piece of community gratitude.

4.5 Things That Make You Go MMMM

Between Waterloo and Punchbowl, the Sydney Metro City & Southwest corridor serves hundreds of thousands of residents across some of the city's most diverse and disadvantaged communities. Yet along this entire stretch there is not a single cinema that can be reached on foot until Bankstown. This outcome arose within existing NSW planning instruments, which assess density, transport efficiency and development yield but do not require cultural infrastructure provision at the station-catchment level.

This is not market failure. It is planning failure.

What was measured

To avoid distortion caused by broad administrative boundaries, this analysis uses ABS SA2-level station catchments, neighbourhood-scale areas centred on each Metro station, rather than SA3 averages. This approach removes CBD dilution, avoids Burwood edge effects, and prevents claims that a cinema exists "somewhere nearby" within a larger statistical area. Each figure therefore reflects residents living within walking distance of a Metro station, assessed station by station rather than averaged across unrelated suburbs.

What emerges is unequivocal. Cinema access is entirely absent along the corridor until the line reaches Bankstown. SEIFA IRSD deciles, a national measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage based on income, employment and education, decline progressively moving south-west, indicating increasing disadvantage along the corridor.

What this means

Across this entire stretch of the Metro, cinema has been excluded as a matter of design, not oversight. Cultural infrastructure was not partially overlooked or unevenly distributed. It was never included.

People can move efficiently through these precincts. They have nowhere to gather once they arrive.

Figure 4.1 courtesy of Sydney Metro

The Yarraville counterpoint

Places such as Yarraville demonstrate what happens when a cinema is treated as core civic infrastructure: sustained foot traffic, a functioning night-time economy, social mixing across age, income and language, and long-term urban renewal linked to local identity. These outcomes are not accidental. They are the result of planning decisions that embedded a cinema as a permanent local anchor.

The Metro corridor shows the inverse. A mural was installed at Waterloo. A cinema was not. That is the difference between symbolic culture and functional cultural infrastructure. Public art embellishes movement. Cultural infrastructure creates place.

What this reveals

This absence is often misread. It is framed as coincidence, economics or taste. It is none of those things.

It is not:

- a market failure
- a lack of audience demand
- a demographic mismatch

It is:

- the cumulative outcome of planning frameworks that removed cinemas from town centres
- a failure to replace them as density intensified
- cultural infrastructure treated as optional rather than essential

Billions have been invested to move people efficiently. Almost nothing has been invested to give them a reason to stay. This outcome was produced not by any single decision, but by planning instruments and environmental assessment frameworks that define “community infrastructure” narrowly, measuring housing, transport, retail and licensed venues while excluding shared cultural venues unless they are heritage-listed or expressly mandated.

The policy question

If cinema is Australia’s most inclusive cultural venue, and Metro precincts are where density, diversity and growth are being concentrated, why has cinema been systematically excluded from every station precinct along this corridor?

4.6 Extractive Entertainment and Planning Outcomes

Canterbury-Bankstown is one of the clearest expressions of a broader planning failure visible across Australia's outer suburbs and growth corridors.

Within the local government area, a large, dense and culturally diverse population is served by a single cinema venue comprising eight screens. By contrast, the area contains multiple extractive entertainment facilities, primarily licensed clubs and hotels, housing approximately 4,900 poker machines. Based on official NSW gaming data, total poker-machine losses recorded within Canterbury-Bankstown across clubs and hotels amount to approximately $690 million over a 12-month period, with an estimated $550 million to $560 million attributable to local residents.

For the purposes of this report, poker-machine venues are described as extractive forms of entertainment: land uses that concentrate revenue extraction within enclosed venues, generate limited spill-over foot traffic, and do not function as shared civic gathering spaces. Their economic model relies on repeat, individualised consumption rather than broad, time-based public participation.

Cinemas operate differently. As civic cultural infrastructure, they generate predictable shared attendance across age groups and income levels, support surrounding hospitality and retail, and anchor local centres as places people return to regularly. Their value lies not only in cultural participation, but in their role as repeatable, intergenerational gathering spaces that stabilise high streets and support local night-time economies.

The coexistence of high extractive-entertainment density and minimal civic-cultural provision in Canterbury-Bankstown is not best explained by community preference or market demand. The LGA is densely populated, highly diverse, and well served by major transport infrastructure, characteristics typically associated with strong cinema attendance where access exists.

Instead, this pattern reflects the cumulative outcomes of planning systems: what has been permitted, what has been protected, and what has not been required.

Similar outcomes are visible across outer-suburban growth corridors along the eastern seaboard, including western Sydney, outer Melbourne and south-east Queensland. Common features include high densities of extractive entertainment uses, limited provision of shared civic cultural infrastructure, and delayed or absent cinemas despite population growth, youth concentration and cultural diversity.

In these areas, the issue is not local misconduct or community preference. It is planning frameworks that have consistently prioritised yield-generating, enclosed entertainment uses while failing to require or safeguard civic cultural infrastructure as density intensifies. Where cinemas are not explicitly planned for or protected, they do not emerge organically.

Western Australia illustrates a different but functionally comparable failure mode. While poker machines are more tightly regulated, growth-suburb development has still proceeded without embedded requirements for civic or cultural infrastructure, including cinemas. The result is similar: large, car-dependent suburbs with limited shared cultural venues and few places designed for regular public gathering.

Different regulatory settings. Different mechanisms. The same outcome.

Across jurisdictions, the evidence points to a consistent conclusion. Where cultural infrastructure is treated as optional within planning systems, extractive uses proliferate and shared civic venues disappear. This is not a reflection of audience preference, taste or demand. It is the predictable result of land-use frameworks that privilege short-term yield over long-term civic function.]

If shared cultural venues are to exist in growth areas, they must be explicitly required, protected and planned for. Leaving their provision to market chance has repeatedly produced the same result: communities with high population density, strong participation potential, and no places to gather.

It should also be acknowledged that fragmented ownership, limited planning expertise and historically thin margins have constrained exhibitors' capacity to advocate consistently within local government processes. That reinforces the need for clear state-level planning frameworks, rather than reliance on case-by-case lobbying by individual operators.

4.7 The Cooks River Catchment: A Cinematic Wasteland

For anyone whose father made them spend school holidays in the 1980s taking water samples along the length of the Cooks River, ostensibly to assist a senior chemistry student at MLC Burwood and incidentally to give a child an early education in heavy

metals, the river’s transformation is striking.

What was once an environmental wasteland has healed. The Cooks is no longer a concrete ditch for industrial effluent and illegal dumping. The grey-brown trough that ran through Sydney's inner south-west has been rehabilitated into a functioning waterway, with its banks reclaimed for walking, cycling and community use.

The contrast points to a consistent planning outcome rather than any meaningful difference in community demand. As density increased, shared civic and cultural infrastructure was neither required nor protected, while extractive entertainment uses proliferated. The result is a sub-regional deficit in gathering places that support collective cultural participation and intergenerational social life.

Cinema and Poker Machine Provision by LGA				
LGA	**Pop** (Approx)	**Cinema Venues /** Screens	**Poker machines** (approx.)	**Planning signal**
Canterbury-Bankstown	~380,000	**1**/8	~4,900	Extreme imbalance
Georges River	~165,000	**1**/7	~2,000	Underserved
Bayside	~188,000	**1**/8	~2,200	Extractive skew
Inner West	~190,000	**2**/18	~1,600	Partial civic retention

Note: Poker-machine figures are indicative, drawn from NSW Liquor & Gaming LGA-level reporting and rounded to planning-scale magnitudes. The table is intended to illustrate structural imbalance, not to function as a regulatory audit.

Table: Cinema and Poker Machine Provision by Local Government Area, Cooks River Catchment

The contrast highlights a **consistent planning outcome**, rather than differences in community demand. As density increased, shared civic cultural infrastructure was not required or protected, while extractive entertainment uses proliferated. The result is a sub-regional deficit in gathering places that support collective cultural participation and intergenerational social life.

Cinema and Extractive Entertainment Venues				
Catchment	**Population** (approx.)	**Major licensed clubs**	**Cinema sites**	**Structural signal**
Canterbury–Bankstown	~380,000	8	1	Extreme imbalance
St George (Georges River + Bayside)	~345,000	7	1	Monocentric, fragile access

4.8 Consolidation and the Loss of Redundancy

Taken together, Canterbury–Bankstown and St George illustrate a consistent sub-regional pattern. Across two dense, rail-connected catchments with a combined population exceeding 700,000, cinema provision has collapsed into single, monocentric sites, while licensed clubs operate at scale and in multiple locations (Tables X and Y).

This imbalance is not the product of local preference or demographic mismatch. It reflects a longer arc of exhibition consolidation in metropolitan Sydney, in which the rationalisation of suburban cinemas by Hoyts and Greater Union reduced redundancy and removed high-street exhibition across large parts of the city. Those closures were permitted under competition law and left unaddressed by planning systems, with no mechanism to require replacement or protect access.

The consolidation of Sydney exhibition delivered operational efficiency, but it also removed choice, resilience and civic presence. Whether driven by explicit coordination or parallel commercial incentives, the outcome was the same: fewer local cinemas, increased single-site dependence, and long-term loss of access that planning frameworks failed to mitigate.

The result is visible today across the Cooks River catchment: regions rich in extractive entertainment capacity, but increasingly fragile in their provision of shared civic cultural infrastructure.

CHAPTER 5
Build It and They Will Come

"Some people just get left out."

— Samson and Delilah (2009)

Access Precedes Audience

5.1 What Cinemas Make Possible Within Communities

Cinema remains Australia's most widely attended out-of-home cultural activity. Each week, it reaches more Australians than any other type of cultural venue, across age, income, geography and language. This is not sentiment or nostalgia. It is an empirical reality, consistently reflected in national attendance data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Crucially, the pattern holds at the local level. Across every SA3 in Australia where access exists, cinema ranks as the most attended cultural activity. No other cultural venue type shows the same geographic consistency. Where cinemas are present and reasonably accessible, participation is broad and habitual, regardless of socio-economic profile or cultural composition.

Where attendance falls, the evidence does not suggest that communities value cinema less. It shows that access has been constrained.

Two factors dominate:

- **The tyranny of distance**, where travel time, transport cost or physical separation exceed reasonable thresholds and participation drops sharply.
- **The constraint of poverty**, where ABS data shows a marked decline in attendance among households in the lowest income percentiles once distance becomes a factor. For the first and second income quintiles, even modest increases in travel cost or time produce disproportionately large falls in participation.

This interaction matters. Cinema attendance does not decline smoothly with income alone. It collapses when low income and poor access coincide. Cinema is not an elite cultural activity enjoyed mainly by wealthier Australians. It is a mass-participation activity that lower-income Australians attend at broadly comparable rates when access is equitable, and abandon only when structural barriers intervene.

The implication is straightforward. Cinema participation is robust in demand but highly sensitive to access. It is strongest where planning, transport and local provision align,

and weakest where distance and disadvantage compound. Attendance patterns therefore reflect infrastructure more than taste.

Where cinemas are embedded in communities, they function as shared civic spaces and engines of regular social participation. Where they are absent, that function is not displaced to other cultural venues. It simply disappears.

Cinema access is therefore not just a cultural preference issue. It is an equity issue and a planning issue.

5.2 Cinema as Mass Participation Infrastructure

What distinguishes cinema is not simply scale, but structure.

Unlike extractive or high-risk entertainment uses, cinema attendance is intergenerational and socially visible. It does not rely on one-off events or discretionary cultural capital. It operates through routine.

Routine matters because it is how cultural participation is formed and sustained.

Where cinemas are present and accessible, attendance becomes habitual. Where they are absent, that habit does not migrate neatly to other venues or platforms. It dissolves. The loss is not symbolic. It is functional. Communities without cinemas lose a predictable site of shared participation and a key element of night-time civic life. These losses fall unevenly, with outer-suburban, lower-SES and high-growth communities most affected.

From a screen-policy perspective, cinema matters for a further reason. Cinema is not simply a venue for films. It is the primary mechanism through which alignment between films and audiences becomes observable. Without access to that mechanism, audience behaviour cannot be reliably tested, learned from or built upon.

This chapter therefore treats cinema access not as a cultural ideal, but as a structural condition. It examines what access enables within communities, how alignment operates when access exists, and why the absence of access produces systematic misreadings of audience demand.

5.3 From Geography to Behaviour

Chapter 5 builds directly on the geographic analysis established in Chapter 4. Drawing on SA3 population data, socio-economic overlays, cinema location mapping, screen counts, admissions and gross box-office performance, it examines what access actually enables within communities, and how alignment between films and audiences operates when access exists.

The evidence shows that access is not merely a prerequisite for attendance. It is the condition that allows alignment to function at all.

Alignment is not abstract. Where access exists, audience behaviour correlates strongly with:

- language spoken on screen
- cultural specificity and relevance
- genre familiarity
- classification suitability
- clarity of marketing and positioning

These factors do not operate independently. They compound.

A culturally aligned film with clear genre signals and appropriate classification will still fail if released into access-poor conditions. Conversely, where access exists, even modestly budgeted films can outperform expectations when alignment is strong.

This is why alignment cannot be addressed at the level of script or development alone. It only becomes visible at the point of encounter.

Evidence from Culturally Diverse Communities

The strongest alignment effects appear in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Where cinemas are present within or near these communities:

- foreign-language films consistently outperform their share of releases
- culturally specific marketing drives repeat attendance
- audience loyalty is sustained across multiple titles

These outcomes recur across Indian, Middle Eastern, East Asian and European-language releases, across states and exhibition contexts.

This confirms the central finding of Report One: Australian audiences are selective, not disengaged. They attend when films reflect them and when access allows habit to form.

When Access Is Weak, Australian Films Lose First

Access constraints disproportionately affect Australian films. In access-poor markets:

- screen counts are limited
- session density is constrained
- programming risk tolerance is low
- runs are shortened before discovery can occur

Under these conditions, Australian films are often the first to be withdrawn. Not because audiences rejected them, but because the system does not allow time or space for alignment to register. Symbolic release replaces meaningful encounter. What appears as weak demand is often simply interrupted alignment.

Alignment requires time, not just presence. Audience behaviour data shows that discovery often occurs after opening weekend, that word-of-mouth builds over multiple sessions, and that repeat attendance is driven by confidence and familiarity. Where access is fragile, films are removed before these dynamics can operate.

This is not a failure of marketing effort. It is a failure of release conditions.

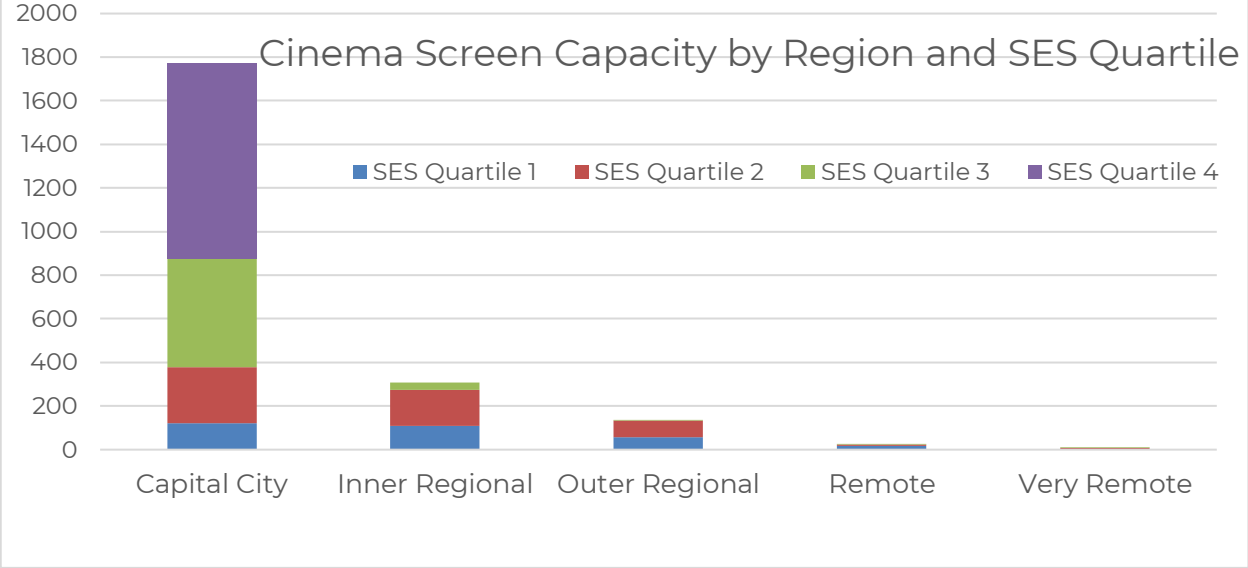
5.4 Cultural Equity and the Loss of Shared Space

Access failure produces inequity. Communities without cinemas lose:

- shared cultural space
- intergenerational participation
- predictable night-time activity
- locally circulating cultural expenditure

Consumption does not disappear. It shifts into private, extractive forms of entertainment that generate limited civic or economic return. This is not a neutral substitution. It represents a permanent loss of cultural infrastructure.

5.5 Market Activity Follows Access



Cinema screen capacity is heavily concentrated in capital-city markets, with much lower provision across regional and remote Australia. Screen count is a stronger measure of practical access than venue count alone because it captures programming flexibility, session depth and the capacity of local markets to sustain audience choice.

This should not be read as a simple matter of taste or willingness to attend. It reflects the concentration of cinema infrastructure itself. Where there are more screens, stronger sites and greater programming flexibility, more revenue is generated and audience habits are easier to sustain. Where capacity is thin, fragile or absent, the market contracts accordingly. Access must therefore be understood not as a downstream outcome of demand, but as a precondition of audience development.

5.6 The Capital Cliff

Australia's cinema access problem is not only about where cinemas are located. It is also about whether the existing network can survive the next capital cycle.

A large share of the nation's screens now sits at or near a point of technical exhaustion. Much of the digital projection equipment installed under the Virtual Print Fee model is reaching end of life at the same time that many operators remain financially depleted from the pandemic and subsequent supply shocks. This creates a structural risk: not a dramatic collapse all at once, but a steady loss of screens through capital failure, particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan markets where replacement costs are hardest to absorb.

That matters because cinema closures are rarely temporary. Once screens are lost, they are costly to replace and often gone for good. The result is not merely a reduction in entertainment choice. It is a permanent loss of access, a weaker theatrical pathway for Australian films, and further erosion of cinema's role as shared civic infrastructure.

The reason this matters now, and did not arise in the same way during the first digital conversion, is straightforward. The original move from 35mm to digital projection was funded through the Virtual Print Fee system because distributors, led by the major Hollywood studios, saved substantial sums by no longer having to manufacture and ship physical film prints. Part of that saving was redirected to exhibitors to help fund the transition. It was a commercially rational arrangement because the studios benefited directly from digitisation.

That logic no longer applies. Digital projection is now the baseline operating system of the industry, not a new efficiency producing distributor windfalls. There is no second round of print savings to harvest, and no commercial mechanism under which Hollywood distributors would rationally fund another full cycle of exhibitor capital replacement. The studios were clear from the outset that the VPF was a transition device, not an enduring renewal model. There is no VPF Mark II coming.

Australia currently operates approximately 2,600 active cinema screens. Digital cinema projectors installed under the Virtual Print Fee model generally have a useful life of around ten to fifteen years. On that basis, industry data and field observation indicate

that approximately 1,800 screens are likely to reach end of life within the next one to four years.

At an average replacement cost of approximately $125,000 per screen, this represents a short-horizon capital exposure of around $225 million, and a total network replacement liability in the order of $325 million.

The Exhibition Renewal Program proposed later in this report does not attempt to fund full network replacement. It is deliberately framed as a triage and stabilisation mechanism, targeted at preventing irreversible loss of cinema access where market failure and capital exhaustion intersect.

Under the proposed settings:

- the Year 1 and 2 uplift of $40 million would support replacement or stabilisation of approximately 320 screens, addressing the most acute failure risks
- the ongoing $20 million per annum program would support approximately 160 screens per year, prioritised by access risk, region, socio-economic need and strategic importance

Even over multiple years, this approach addresses only a portion of the near-term ageing cohort, and a minority of the total network. It therefore represents a minimum viable intervention, not a comprehensive solution.

The figures used are themselves conservative. The average replacement cost does not account for associated expenses such as sound systems, servers, lenses, installation, downtime, financing costs, or the higher per-screen costs often faced by regional and single-screen venues. Nor does it include broader capital pressures related to accessibility upgrades, energy efficiency, or deferred maintenance following the pandemic.

The intent of the program is not to remove private responsibility for capital investment. It is to prevent avoidable closures caused by timing and scale mismatches, where otherwise viable cinemas fail because required capital expenditure cannot be absorbed quickly enough after a prolonged period of financial depletion.

Seen in this context, the proposed level of cinema investment does not overstate the problem. It deliberately under-claims against the full scale of need in order to establish a credible, fiscally contained mechanism that prevents the most damaging outcomes first.

This is preventative infrastructure policy, not industry rescue.

5.7 Exhibition Renewal: International Precedent, Capital Reality and the Australian Response

Comparable screen economies confronted the exhibition renewal problem earlier and resolved it through explicit public policy, not market expectation. In each case, cinema exhibition is treated as cultural infrastructure rather than discretionary commercial property.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom supports cinema and audience development through the BFI Film Audience Network (BFI FAN), a National Lottery-funded collaboration of eight UK film hubs led by major regional and national film organisations. The model is explicitly audience-facing. It is designed to widen film choice, build audiences and strengthen the independent exhibition ecology through geographically distributed delivery rather than a single central office. In the BFI's current 2026–2029 National Lottery Funding Plan, BFI FAN is allocated £10.8 million, with additional audience-facing lines including Open Cinemas (£3.0 million) and broader audience-project support. The significance of the UK model lies not only in the funding, but in the structure: audience development and exhibition support are delivered through a standing network with local reach and sector expertise.

France

France has long treated cinemas as part of its national cultural infrastructure. Through the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), exhibition support sits alongside production and distribution as a core pillar of screen policy. The CNC's framework includes both automatic and selective support for cinema creation and modernisation, with eligible expenditure covering projection equipment, technical upgrades, accessibility works, refurbishment, safety and compliance measures, and digital tools linked to cinema operations. Its support architecture also includes targeted aid for small and medium exhibitors, itinerant rural circuits, and cinemas maintaining difficult programming in competitive environments. The system is tied to ticket-tax and receipts-based reinvestment mechanisms rather than relying on ad hoc rescue. In 2024, France recorded 181.5 million admissions, 6,354 screens, and a 44.8% market share for French films, underscoring the scale and resilience of its cinema network.

Germany

Germany provides explicit exhibition support through the Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) and related federal programmes. The FFA states that cinema funding is intended to strengthen and maintain a nationwide and diverse cinema structure and its quality. The system combines project cinema funding for modernisation, improvement, accessibility and, in some cases, structural new-build or reopening measures, with automatic reference funding for cinemas achieving strong attendance for German and European films. Federal support has also included the Zukunftsprogramm Kino, through which €137 million has been made available since 2020 for cinema investment, and the annual Liebling Kino programme prize, worth €7 million a year, rewarding strong German,

European and culturally ambitious programming. In July 2025, the FFA also announced €4.06 million in the first automated funding round under the new framework for items including projectors, seating, ticketing systems and accessibility upgrades. Germany's model is notable because it supports cinema modernisation, programming quality and audience performance as normal components of screen policy.

Austria

Austria's exhibition-focused support is more fragmented, but still materially more structured than Australia's. Through the Österreichisches Filminstitut (ÖFI) and ÖFI+, Austria explicitly supports not only production but also distribution, dissemination and theatrical release. Alongside this, Austria operates a standing, sector-embedded exhibition renewal mechanism through the Investment Allowance Agreement (IAA) administered by ARGE Film & Kino. Under that agreement, participating cinemas may retain €0.22 per admission from exhibition fees to finance approved capital improvements aimed at improving cinema attendance and the attractiveness of Austrian cinemas. Eligible uses include digital image and sound equipment, seating, screens, accessibility works, foyer and lobby renewal, ventilation and air conditioning, lighting, projectors and lenses, façade works, and other presentation or compliance upgrades. Based on official admissions data, that formula implies a gross annual funding flow of roughly €2.31 million in 2024 and €2.58 million in 2025, before any adjustment for participation or disbursement timing. Austria therefore combines federal support for release and exploitation with a standing exhibition-upgrade mechanism that treats cinema presentation and renewal as a managed sector responsibility.

Comparative observation

What these systems share is not a single institutional design, but a common policy principle: films do not achieve full cultural value simply by being financed and completed. They require functioning cinemas, audience pathways and renewal mechanisms that keep public encounter possible. Whether through national reinvestment systems, dedicated cinema-modernisation funding, distributed audience networks or standing exhibition-upgrade schemes, these countries recognise that exhibition is not an optional afterthought. It is part of the screen system itself.

The Australian Context: Why the Market Will Not Deliver Renewal

Australia's current renewal challenge cannot be resolved by repeating assumptions from the first digital transition.

Between 2010 and 2014, Australian cinemas converted to digital projection under the Virtual Print Fee (VPF) model. That transition was funded globally by distributors, led by the major Hollywood studios, because digital distribution eliminated the cost of manufacturing and transporting 35mm prints. The savings accrued to distributors.

The VPF redirected part of that windfall to fund exhibitor equipment and was enforced through Most Favoured Nation provisions, ensuring all distributors contributed

proportionately. The studios were explicit that this was a one-off transition mechanism. There would be no second cycle.

There is no VPF Mark 2.

Digital projection is now a mature, ongoing operating cost for exhibition, not a transformational benefit for distribution. Distributors have no financial incentive, cost-saving justification or strategic reason to fund a second round of exhibitor capital expenditure.

At the same time, exhibitors' capacity to self-fund renewal has been exhausted by prolonged pandemic closures, suppressed supply following global industrial action, and the deferral of essential capital works to preserve liquidity and remain operational.

The sector has survived operationally, but it has done so by consuming reserves accumulated over decades.

This is capital exhaustion, not temporary disruption.

5.8 The Cinema Capital Cliff: Scale and Timing

Australia's cinema renewal challenge is immediate and substantial. As set out above, a large share of the national screen base is approaching end of life at a scale that many exhibitors, particularly single, twin, regional and outer-metropolitan venues, cannot absorb alone. Once projection systems fail outright, closures are often permanent rather than temporary.

The question is no longer whether renewal is needed. It is whether it happens in time to prevent avoidable loss of access.

The Exhibition Renewal Program proposed in this report is designed to address that structural gap directly and to bring Australia closer to established international practice. It is deliberately front-loaded, with a $40 million uplift across the first two years to address the most acute end-of-life risks, followed by ongoing support of $20 million per annum to sustain renewal and reduce the likelihood of future cliff effects. As set out later in this report, this funding can be delivered as a net saving within the screen sector through rebalancing existing support settings.

This is not conceived as permanent subsidy. It is targeted, time-limited renewal funding structured to preserve commercial discipline while preventing avoidable closures. Co-contribution remains central to the model. Under the default setting, support would be provided on a 50:50 basis between government and exhibitor. In regional, outer-metropolitan and lower-SES communities, where access risk is higher and the social cost of closure greater, the balance would shift to 70 per cent public support and 30 per cent exhibitor contribution. Assistance would be scalable according to screen count, demonstrated need and strategic importance.

Eligible expenditure would extend beyond projection replacement alone. It should include sound systems, accessibility upgrades, essential seating and amenity renewal,

energy-efficiency and compliance works, and other remediation necessary to keep sites operating safely and credibly. The problem facing the sector is not only that projectors age. It is that capital exhaustion tends to arrive across multiple parts of the cinema asset base at once, particularly after a period in which operators have deferred works simply to remain open.

Federal support, however, should not be unconditional. Cinemas that accept Commonwealth renewal funding are receiving public money in the public interest. With that support comes a reasonable expectation that they contribute to Australian audience development and to the visibility of Australian films where commercially and practically possible. These obligations should remain scaled, proportionate and realistic, and should increase with venue size and screen count. They may include a demonstrated commitment to programming Australian films where available and suitable, participation in coordinated slate initiatives or release strategies, cooperation with audience-access and data-reporting requirements, and reasonable support for Australian films through session provision and run integrity, consistent with audience demand. This is not a quota proposal, nor an attempt to override commercial judgement. Participation in the program would remain voluntary. But where public money stabilises private exhibition infrastructure, some reciprocal public purpose is justified.

The policy outcome is straightforward. An Exhibition Renewal Program of this kind would prevent avoidable closures, stabilise cinema access, and preserve the physical foundation of Australian theatrical release. It would recognise what the first digital transition made clear: the original conversion was distributor-funded for rational commercial reasons, but those conditions no longer exist. The current renewal challenge must therefore be addressed not as a private inconvenience, but as a matter of public cultural infrastructure, equity and access.

Absent such a program, Australia faces an orderly but irreversible contraction in cinema access, not because audiences have abandoned the medium, but because capital renewal has been left to a market with no mechanism to deliver it. The market has already done what it can. Responsibility now sits with policy.

Taken together, Chapters 4 and 5 establish a clear conclusion. Australian films do not underperform because audiences lack interest in local stories. They underperform because access is uneven, alignment is undervalued, release conditions are often hostile, and responsibility for audience encounter has been repeatedly deferred. Production-only solutions cannot correct this, because alignment cannot be retrofitted once the system has already failed to provide access, time and proper conditions of encounter. It must be designed into the system from the start.

That is the reform task taken up in the chapters that follow. They turn from diagnosis to structure: the policy settings that produced these conditions, and the practical changes required to reverse them.

CHAPTER 6

Market Readiness and the Limits of Official Reporting

"Science isn't about playing it safe."
— The Dish

A Note on Data Integrity

Before presenting the findings in this report, it is necessary to address a central limitation in Australia's official screen reporting framework.

Much of the publicly cited analysis relied upon by policymakers, including genre and format reporting published by Screen Australia, is not sufficient for assessing the contemporary theatrical market. It is largely derived from production reporting and how projects are classified at the time of funding, rather than from observed theatrical release outcomes.

In effect, it describes expenditure on production more than the impact and value of that production to Australian cinema audiences.

Official datasets do not adequately account for screen access, session counts, release scale, release timing, marketing readiness, box office performance, admissions, post-cinema performance, international outcomes, or the pattern, strength and duration of audience engagement.

A low-budget documentary with a limited festival or token release can be weighted equivalently to a wide-release family film that reaches hundreds of thousands of Australians. From a production accounting perspective, this may be defensible. From an audience, cultural or market perspective, it is not.

What gets counted shapes what gets managed. When official reporting is built primarily around project activation, expenditure and completion, the system becomes better at tracking activity than at testing whether films actually connect with audiences.

This chapter is therefore concerned with a simple but foundational problem: Australia's official screen framework measures production more reliably than encounter.

6.1 What Gets Counted, What Gets Missed

Australia's screen policy framework is strongest at counting what happens before release. It can report projects approved, budgets triggered, jobs supported and productions completed. These are all legitimate administrative functions. But they are not a sufficient basis for assessing whether Australian films are reaching Australians in cinemas.

A production may be fully financed, acquitted and formally successful within the terms of funding administration while still failing to secure meaningful theatrical reach. A film may meet every procedural milestone and still arrive at release with limited access, weak marketing, no real audience testing and only nominal accountability for what happens once it enters the market.

Conversely, films that are strongly aligned to audience identity, released with clarity and supported with practical theatrical discipline may perform better on audience terms even where they do not fit the preferred cultural or funding narrative upstream.

The problem, then, is not merely incomplete reporting. It is a distorted understanding of performance. Production-only frameworks treat making as the central public outcome. But from the perspective of audiences, exhibitors and public value, completion is not the same as connection.

This distinction matters throughout the report. The purpose of screen policy cannot simply be to create films. It must also be to create the conditions in which those films can be found, understood, accessed and experienced.

6.2 The Inflection Point: 2008

The weaknesses identified in this chapter did not emerge accidentally. They sit within a broader policy shift that occurred around 2008 with the creation of Screen Australia, the introduction of the Producer Offset, and a structural narrowing of what was treated as core national screen responsibility.

This was a major reset in policy architecture. It brought some clear benefits, including increased production volume and stronger financing capacity. But it also moved the system towards a model in which upstream activity was privileged and downstream audience outcomes became more weakly governed.

Producer support expanded. Production incentives became more central. Distributor attachment remained important in practice. But exhibition, theatrical access and audience accountability were left increasingly outside the core frame of policy management.

The result was not simply that some datasets disappeared or weakened. It was that release outcomes became structurally easier to defer. The system could point to the volume of films being made without being equally disciplined about whether those films were reaching audiences effectively.

That shift is visible in the market. Since the reforms, Australia has significantly increased the number of films produced, but has not sustained equivalent audience reach. More films are being made. Fewer Australians are seeing them.

That is not a cultural failure on the part of audiences. It is a structural warning about the design of the system.

6.3 Marketing Readiness and the QAPE Distortion

Marketing readiness is one of the most immediate and correctable weaknesses in Australia's screen funding system.

Films backed by Screen Australia and/or the Producer Offset are contractually required to deliver core marketing assets, including a trailer, a poster and a suite of stills. On paper, this suggests a baseline recognition that theatrical release depends on audience-facing materials.

In practice, however, these obligations are often treated as administrative compliance rather than as market-facing deliverables. Assets are not always monitored for quality, timeliness, strategic coherence or release-readiness. Placeholder materials can satisfy contractual requirements. Cinemas can receive materials that are late, weak, unusable or misaligned with the finished film.

This is not a minor issue. Marketing assets are often the first point of contact between a film and its potential audience. They establish tone, genre expectation, audience identity and commercial invitation. If that work is weak, unclear or mistimed, the film enters the market at a disadvantage before release has properly begun.

The problem is compounded by current QAPE settings. Because certain marketing costs may be claimable when incurred during production, the system can incentivise the creation of promotional materials too early, before the final market position of the film is

clear. What is rewarded is not necessarily readiness at the point of release, but expenditure at the point of eligibility.

That is a structural distortion. It encourages completion of assets rather than effectiveness of assets.

A more audience-focused system would not ask simply whether a trailer, poster and stills package exist. It would ask whether they are usable, legible, timely and fit for purpose in the theatrical market. At present, that distinction is too often lost.

6.4 From Early Learning to Late Exposure

This marketing weakness is linked to a broader loss of market testing and early audience feedback.

There was a time when formal audience feedback, distributor challenge and market testing played a more active role in shaping films before release. That did not guarantee success, but it did create opportunities for course correction while change was still possible.

Over time, those practices have weakened. The first meaningful market encounter for many publicly backed films now occurs at or near release, when key creative, strategic and promotional decisions are already locked.

By that Stage, audience response is no longer functioning as feedback. It is functioning as outcome.

This has several consequences. Alignment risks are pushed downstream into exhibition. Audience response is treated as judgement rather than information. Distributors and exhibitors absorb the cost of misalignment. Funding bodies lose an opportunity to learn early and adjust settings before public money translates into public underperformance.

When the system no longer expects to learn before release, it becomes more likely to explain away weak performance after release.

6.5 Producer-Distributor Incentives and Audience Risk

A related problem lies in the incentive structure surrounding producer-distributor attachment.

In nearly all practical cases, Australian theatrical features require local distributor attachment to secure Screen Australia investment in advance. Distributor attachment also plays a crucial role in Offset-era financing structures because the theatrical release pathway helps demonstrate market intent and eventual exploitation.

In principle, this should support commercial discipline. In practice, it does not always do so.

Some distributors work rigorously for that role. They test positioning, push materials, build audience logic, negotiate carefully with exhibitors and bring genuine release

discipline to the project. Others do not. Under current settings, the existence of attachment can matter more than the quality of stewardship.

This is particularly important where distributors move into producer positions, or where the boundary between producer and distributor interest becomes blurred. That can be effective when the distributor is genuinely invested in market performance and works actively to realise it. It can also create a pathway for formal eligibility and structural advantage without equivalent accountability for release effort or theatrical outcome.

The issue is not that distributors should never be producers, or that every such arrangement is suspect. The issue is that the system does not reliably distinguish between active market stewardship and passive compliance.

Where formal attachment is rewarded more clearly than demonstrated release performance, there is room for gaming. Some participants carry real audience risk and do the work. Others satisfy the architecture of the system while contributing less discipline than the structure appears to assume.

That weakens accountability at exactly the point where public policy should be strongest: where films are meant to meet audiences.

6.6 Structural Changes Not Captured by Official Data

The limitations of official reporting have become more pronounced in recent years because the theatrical market itself has changed.

Australia's cinema environment has undergone substantial structural shifts, including reduced access density and increased exhibition concentration, shifts in release scale and run length, the rise of diaspora-led theatrical markets, post-COVID changes in audience behaviour, and altered programming and dating dynamics.

None of these changes is well captured in production-based reporting.

As a consequence, official data increasingly obscures the growing misalignment between Australian production output and the genres, classifications and formats that demonstrably attract, or repel, cinema audiences.

This report addresses that missing part of the picture by drawing instead on verified theatrical release data, reported gross box office and admissions, classifications as released and marketed by distributors, observed release scale and timing, and population-adjusted access measures.

The purpose of this approach is straightforward. It examines what Australians are actually seeing in Australian cinemas.

Accordingly, the analysis in this chapter and those that follow is grounded in theatrical release and observed audience behaviour, not production intent or funding categorisation.

6.7 Where the Data Is Missing

Despite the centrality of cinema to Australia's screen ecosystem, the national data environment contains major gaps.

Australia currently has no national session dataset, no admissions-by-film-by-cinema reporting, no audience demographic reporting, no annual theatrical performance analysis, no distribution transparency, no public marketing-readiness compliance data, no regional or socio-economic access breakdowns, and no release-date performance reporting.

These gaps have direct practical consequences across the screen ecosystem.

Without transparent national reporting on theatrical outcomes, producers cannot reliably identify market opportunities or audience gaps, distributors cannot plan release strategies with confidence or precision, exhibitors cannot assess demand, schedule effectively or commit screens, funding agencies cannot evaluate whether policy settings are working as intended, government cannot clearly justify ongoing public investment, and the public cannot assess whether cultural objectives are being met.

This is not simply a technical weakness. It is a policy weakness. It limits evidence-based decision-making, weakens feedback loops between investment and outcomes, obscures structural underperformance, and prevents the system from learning consistently from success as well as failure.

6.8 Encouraging Signs, But Structure Must Follow

There are encouraging signs. Screen Australia's current CEO, Deirdre Brennan, appears to be placing greater emphasis on audience insight, data capability and evidence-led decision-making. That is a welcome and necessary shift.

This report should be read in that context. Its critique is not aimed at individuals, nor does it deny the seriousness of current reform intent. The issue is structural. Australia's screen system still measures production more clearly than audience encounter, and still lacks the reporting, funding and access mechanisms needed to connect public investment with public experience.

A stronger audience and data focus from Screen Australia's leadership is therefore not incidental to this report. It is precisely the kind of shift the evidence suggests is needed

6.9 The Lost Middle: 94 Films and the Disappearance of Practical Theatrical Intelligence

The removal from public access of the 2017 *94 Films: A Commercial Analysis* report is emblematic of the wider problem.

That report directly linked screen count, marketing strength and revenue. It was one of the few publicly available documents to bridge the gap between production support and theatrical market performance. Its disappearance removed one of the very few pieces of commercially useful theatrical intelligence available to policymakers, industry participants and the wider public.

It was only one document, but it sat in an important place. Production data told one part of the story. Individual release anecdotes told another. *94 Films* occupied the middle ground: the practical relationship between market conditions and outcomes.

That middle has now largely disappeared from public reporting.

Production is still counted. Selected successes are still highlighted. But the operational relationship between release scale, marketing readiness, audience traction and theatrical performance is rarely made visible in a recurring public way.

Once that middle layer disappears, the system becomes much weaker at learning. It loses a shared public reference point for what worked, what failed, what conditions shaped the result, and what might be improved next time.

That is why this report treats the loss of *94 Films* as more than a footnote. It is a symptom of a broader retreat from practical theatrical intelligence.

6.10 Australia Once Had Greater Theatrical Visibility

Australia did not always operate with this little public theatrical visibility.

For years, the Australian Film Commission published practical, industry-facing theatrical intelligence through *Get the Picture* and related statistical reporting. Information on admissions, screens and market context was available to government, industry, researchers and the public. Early Screen Australia reporting still retained aspects of this inherited logic, including clearer connections between admissions and performance.

By comparison, the current public reporting model is much more fragmented. Screen Australia still publishes some theatrical data. It maintains fact-finder pages, methodological notes and selected annual report indicators. The problem is not total absence of data.

The problem is the absence of a stable annual title-level accountability framework.

Some information appears on web pages. Some appears as rounded aggregate KPIs. Some appears as selected highlights. Some appears only intermittently. What is missing is a single recurring structure that allows Parliament, industry and the public to see, year by year, how Australian films performed theatrically in a consistent and comparable way.

Comparative Reporting Framework – Pre 2008 and Post		
Reporting Dimension	Australian Film Commission	Screen Australia
Primary reporting focus	Audience reach, market context and production activity	Production activity, project completion and selected audience indicators
Audience admissions	More consistently reported for supported films	Not systematically reported at title level
Box office transparency	Regularly published and tracked	Published selectively and inconsistently across formats
Theatrical release outcomes	Treated as a significant performance measure	Reported partially, often downstream of production reporting
Exhibition data	More closely integrated into performance assessment	Largely outside the core public reporting framework
Market attachment	Stronger emphasis through distribution pathways	Required in practice for many projects, but not consistently tied to release outcomes
Recoupment discipline	More visible in evaluation and accountability	Less visible in public reporting
Slate-level analysis	Conducted and published periodically	Limited in recurring public form
Genre mix monitoring	More visible in public market analysis	Not systematically connected to theatrical audience outcomes
Children / family audience metrics	More clearly recognised in audience reporting	Less visible as a distinct theatrical audience category
Regional access reporting	Considered within broader performance analysis	Patchy and indirect
Cultural impact measures	More closely linked to audience encounter	More often inferred from production, festival or selected outcome data
Learning feedback loop	Outcomes more visibly informed future policy settings	Feedback into assessment is less transparent publicly
Public transparency	Higher	Low to moderate
Statutory responsibility for access	De facto responsibility exercised through reporting and market analysis	Not explicit

Table 6.1*contrasts the audience-facing reporting framework of the Australian Film Commission with the production-centric framework that followed.*

This matters because a reporting system shapes what can be governed. If theatrical performance is only partially disclosed, it becomes harder to assess release effectiveness, harder to compare outcomes across years, harder to identify market failure and harder to test whether public investment is producing public audience reach.

Australia did not always operate this blindly. The earlier reporting culture was more explicit about market performance, theatrical reach and audience encounter. What followed was a more production-centred model in which theatrical outcomes remained visible only in part: sometimes reported, sometimes highlighted, sometimes searchable, but not systematically disclosed in a stable annual form.

6.11 The 2024/25 Admissions Example

The current reporting model is well illustrated by Screen Australia's 2024/25 annual-report admissions KPI.

The agency reported a target of 2.7 million admissions for productions shown at movie theatres, measured on a rolling three-year average basis, and a result of 2.1 million. It

also highlighted selected global box office outcomes for the top five Australian films over the reporting period.

This is useful headline information, but it is not a substitute for a full annual theatrical account.

By the 2024/25 reporting cycle, two of the three years in that rolling measure were already known. This was therefore not a wholly speculative target. On Screen Australia's own published basis, the target effectively required a very strong recovery year. On their rounded figures, hitting a 2.7 million average would have required a third-year result of 4 million admissions.

On the raw admissions data used in this report, a four million-plus year was historically possible, but far from routine. The last year above 4 million admissions was 2021. Before that, the threshold had only been reached intermittently. The three-year rolling average has been above 4 million in only 15 years between 1990 and 2025, with the most recent being 2017.

That matters because the published result of 2.1 million represents only about 78 per cent of Screen Australia's own target. On the reconciled title-level total used in this report, the equivalent figure is higher, at approximately 2.27 million admissions, or about 84 per cent of target. That still falls short of the agency's 2.7 million benchmark, but it alters the scale of the miss.

When performance is already well below target, an additional six percentage points of achievement is not trivial. It helps, and it should be counted.

Given that Screen Australia also has visibility over the slate of films coming through the system, whether through direct investment or the Producer Offset, its forward forecasting of theatrical performance in this case looks more poorly calibrated than merely unlucky.

This is the broader problem with the current reporting style. Rounded annual figures, rolling averages and selected highlights can provide a headline, but they do not provide the exact, transparent and independently verifiable picture that proper public accountability requires.

A system that wishes to claim audience outcomes should publish them in a form that allows those outcomes to be tested clearly, exactly and consistently.

6.12 Conclusion: If It's Not Mandated, It's Not Managed

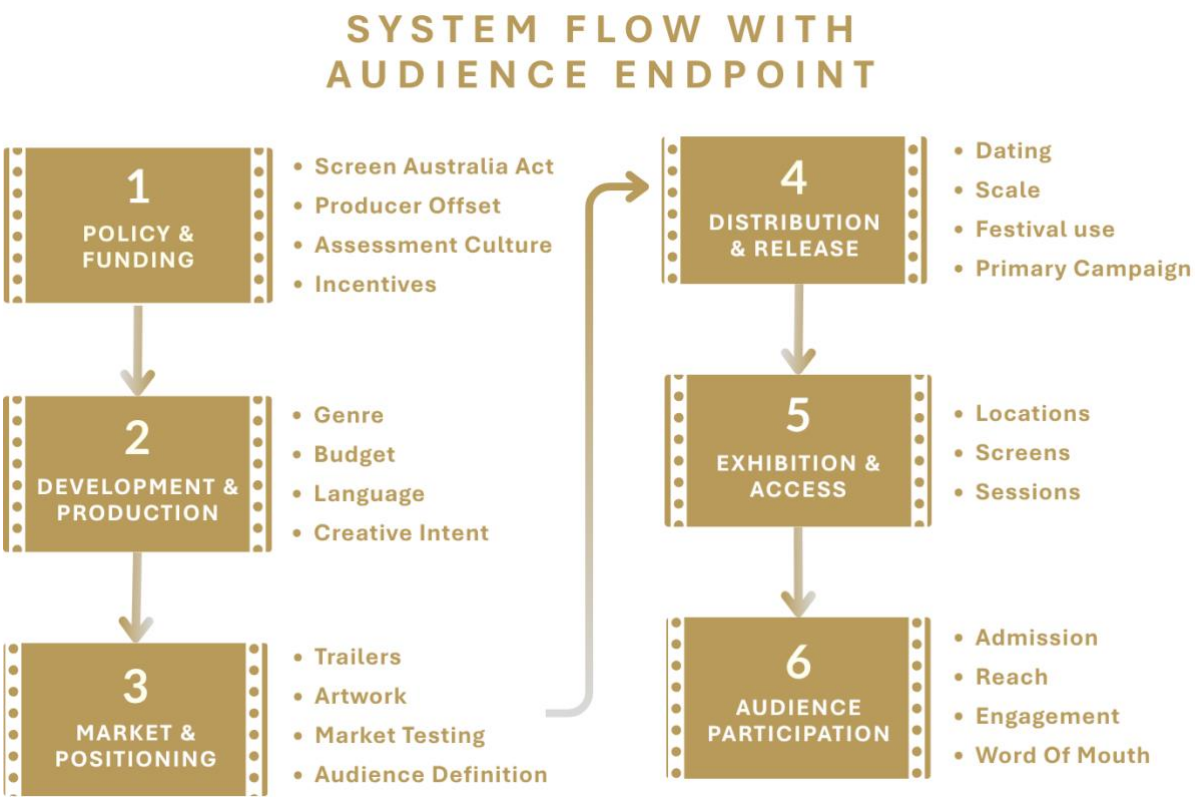
The consequence of this chapter's argument is practical, not rhetorical.

If market readiness is weak, films enter release underprepared. If distributor attachment is rewarded without sufficient accountability, audience risk is displaced rather than managed. If audience feedback arrives too late, the system learns after failure rather than before it. And if theatrical reporting is fragmented, neither policy nor industry can reliably identify what is working.

These are not separate problems. They are connected failures in the chain between public investment and public encounter.

The governing principle should therefore be simple: if it's not mandated, it's not managed. If it's not managed, it's not measured.

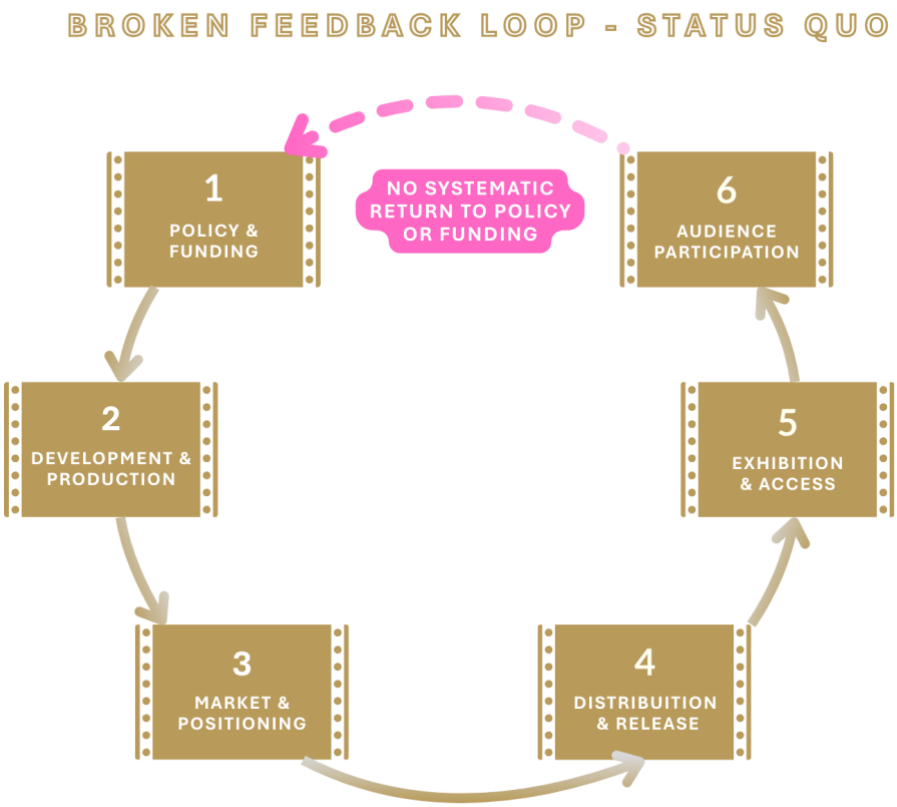
That logic applies directly to theatrical performance. If meaningful market readiness is not mandated, it will not be managed consistently. If release accountability is not managed, it will not be measured properly. And if it is not measured in a stable, public and comparable way, it cannot reliably inform policy improvement.



That is why the reporting failure matters. It is not just a data issue. It is a broken feedback loop between production, release and audience participation.

Australia's screen policy framework remains capable of funding films into existence. What it does much less well is ensure that those films are positioned, tested, released and evaluated in a way that maximises their chance of being seen.

That is the blind spot this report seeks to make visible. Before presenting the findings in this report, it was necessary to address a critical limitation in Australia's official screen reporting framework.



Without these conditions, the system risks replacing honest learning with polite reporting.

Audience outcomes are not politically convenient, but they are democratically essential. They are how public investment is tested against public experience. A screen system that cannot absorb uncomfortable feedback, or speak plainly about what it reveals, cannot improve its alignment with audiences over time.

Reports can disappear. Data can be shelved. But without a functioning audience feedback loop, protected by continuity and independent judgement, the system will continue to repeat the same mistakes under new titles.

CHAPTER 7
Following the Money

"You can't change the rules just because you don't like the way I'm doing it."

— Chopper

Why Australia Funds Production but Not Audiences

7.1 The Visible Budget Is Not the Whole System

Public discussion of Australian screen policy often begins and ends with the Screen Australia budget. At roughly $90 million per year, that figure is real, but it is only the most visible part of the system.

The national screen funding architecture extends well beyond direct agency expenditure. Once the Producer Offset, the Location Offset, the PDV Offset, inbound production incentives, and state and territory contributions are properly counted, the scale of public commitment changes materially.

On a conservative system-wide view, Australian governments commit approximately $1.3 to $1.4 billion per year to screen activity.

This includes:

- Commonwealth tax expenditures through offsets
- Commonwealth agency funding, including Screen Australia, Ausfilm and the NFSA
- State agency funding
- state and territory incentives and production support

These mechanisms differ in form, but not in fiscal reality. Forgone revenue is still public expenditure. Treasury treats it that way. Finance models it that way. It represents real fiscal exposure whether it appears as a grant or a tax setting.

The key question is not how much support exists. It is how that support is structured.

7.2 The State Agencies: Cultural Mandates, Economic Logic

The state and territory agencies are an essential part of Australia's screen system. They do not simply duplicate Screen Australia at smaller scale. Their role is partly cultural, but it is also explicitly economic and place-based.

Agencies such as VicScreen, Screen Queensland, Screenwest, the South Australian Film Corporation, Screen NSW, Screen Tasmania, Screen Territory and Screen Canberra support local production, attract interstate and international projects, develop skills, fund screen culture, support festivals, administer location and PDV incentives, and position their jurisdictions as production hubs.

This work is valuable. It builds local industry capacity, supports employment, sustains crews and facilities, attracts inward expenditure and gives states a reason to compete for production activity. In many cases, state agencies are also closer than the Commonwealth to local practitioners, local festivals and regional screen communities.

But their mandates also shape their incentives. State agencies are often judged by the amount of production expenditure they attract, the jobs they support, the number of projects they back, the use of local facilities and the visibility of their state as a filming destination. These are legitimate economic-development measures. They are not, however, the same as audience outcomes.

A film or series can be a policy success for a state agency because it spends money locally, employs local crew, uses local post-production services, showcases locations or strengthens the state's production base. It may achieve those outcomes even if its theatrical audience is small, its cinema release is limited, or its long-term public reach is not measured in any meaningful way.

This is not a failure of state agencies. It is a feature of the architecture. States and territories are designed to pursue industry development, employment, investment attraction, regional branding and local capacity. Those objectives sit naturally on the production side of the system.

The consequence is that the national production bias is reinforced rather than corrected. Commonwealth tax offsets reward qualifying production expenditure. Screen Australia supports development, production, promotion and distribution, but does not structurally fund exhibition access at scale. State agencies then add further weight to production, location attraction, incentives, skills, facilities and project finance.

Some state support does reach audiences. Festivals, screen-culture programs, regional initiatives and selected audience-development activities are important parts of the ecosystem. But they remain comparatively small, fragmented and uneven across jurisdictions. They do not amount to a coordinated national exhibition or audience-access strategy.

This matters because state agencies are often the part of the system most closely connected to place. If cinema access is uneven, if regional venues are fragile, if outer-metropolitan growth corridors lack screens, and if local audiences are not encountering Australian films, the state layer should be structurally important. Yet in practice, the strongest incentives at state level remain tied to production activity rather than the conditions of public encounter.

7.3 What the System Is Designed to Fund

When the system is viewed as a whole, a clear pattern emerges. The overwhelming majority of public screen funding is triggered by production activity.

Funding flows when:

- a project enters production
- expenditure occurs
- qualifying Australian production expenditure (QAPE) is incurred
- international production is attracted into the country

By contrast, funding is only weakly or inconsistently triggered by audience-facing outcomes such as release preparedness, exhibition access, or measurable audience reach.

That distinction matters more than any individual line item.

Australia does fund marketing, distribution and other audience-facing activity. But these are largely embedded within agency programs and discretionary decisions. They are not system-defining conditions.

The system is structured around making films. It is much less clearly structured around ensuring that Australians see them.

7.4 What the Numbers Show

The scale of the imbalance becomes clear when even conservative figures are applied.

Across approximately $1.3 billion in annual public screen support:

- around $6 million is directed to promotion and distribution
- around $3 million to $4 million is directed to exhibition access and related initiatives, much of it festival-facing
- hard-top cinemas in the conventional sense, receive between $0 and $500,000 in direct support in a normal year, with the upper end more than covering the small regional grants that may be available through state agencies

The major recent exception was the Commonwealth's $20 million COVID recovery SCREEN Fund for independent cinemas, which was broadly successful. Most operators survived, although a small number of single-site cinemas still exited the market, alongside the notable collapse of Western Australia's long-standing Grand Cinemas circuit.

In practical terms:

- promotion and distribution account for less than 0.5 per cent of total public support
- exhibition and access account for roughly 0.2 to 0.3 per cent
- combined, audience-facing structural funding remains well under 1 per cent

Australia does not lack screen funding. What it lacks is audience-weighted funding.

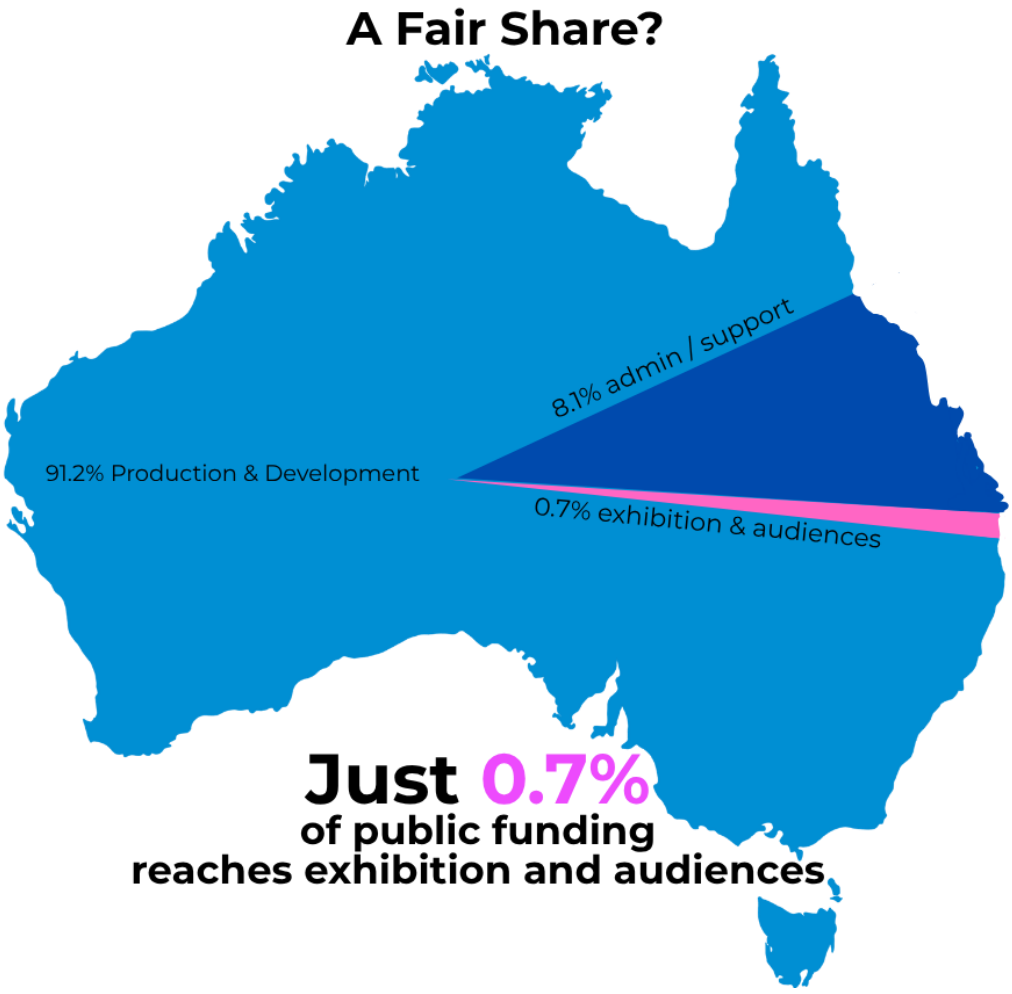


Chart 7.1 — A Fair Share? Audience-facing public screen funding in context

Less than one per cent of public screen funding is structurally directed to exhibition, audience access, promotion and distribution, the parts of the system that help Australians find, reach and see films.

7.5 What Tax Offsets Conceal

One reason this imbalance is poorly understood is that a majority of public support sits within tax settings rather than visible expenditure.

The Producer Offset, Location Offset and PDV Offset together account for more than half of Commonwealth support. These are often described as incentives rather than spending, but in fiscal terms they are both.

They shape:

- what gets made
- where it gets made
- how it is financed
- how risk is distributed

What they do not do is tie public support in any systematic way to:

- audience reach
- theatrical visibility
- exhibition access
- marketing readiness

More than half of public support is therefore delivered through mechanisms triggered by production activity, not by whether Australians actually encounter the work.

7.6 Who gets the biggest bite?

If the earlier charts show how little public support reaches audiences, the next question is who benefits most from the much larger pool of production-linked support.

On Screen Australia's latest Drama Report figures, a rate-corrected drama-only model suggests that more than half of production-linked public support may now be associated with foreign activity. Australian theatrical features generated $379 million in expenditure in 2024–25, while Australian television and VOD drama generated $688 million. Applying the relevant Producer Offset rates of 40 per cent for theatrical features and 30 per cent for television and VOD produces a notional Australian support figure of approximately $358 million.

Against this, foreign drama activity totalled $1.6 billion. Applying the 30 per cent Location and PDV rate as a notional guide produces a foreign support figure of approximately $480 million. On that basis, foreign activity accounts for roughly 57.3 per cent of total drama-linked support, compared with 42.7 per cent for Australian drama.

This is not a certified outlay figure. It is an indicative model based on Screen Australia's published expenditure data and current federal incentive settings. However, it is directionally important because it shows the scale of the policy imbalance. The largest share of production-linked support may now sit not with Australian-controlled drama, but with foreign activity using Australia as a production location or service base.

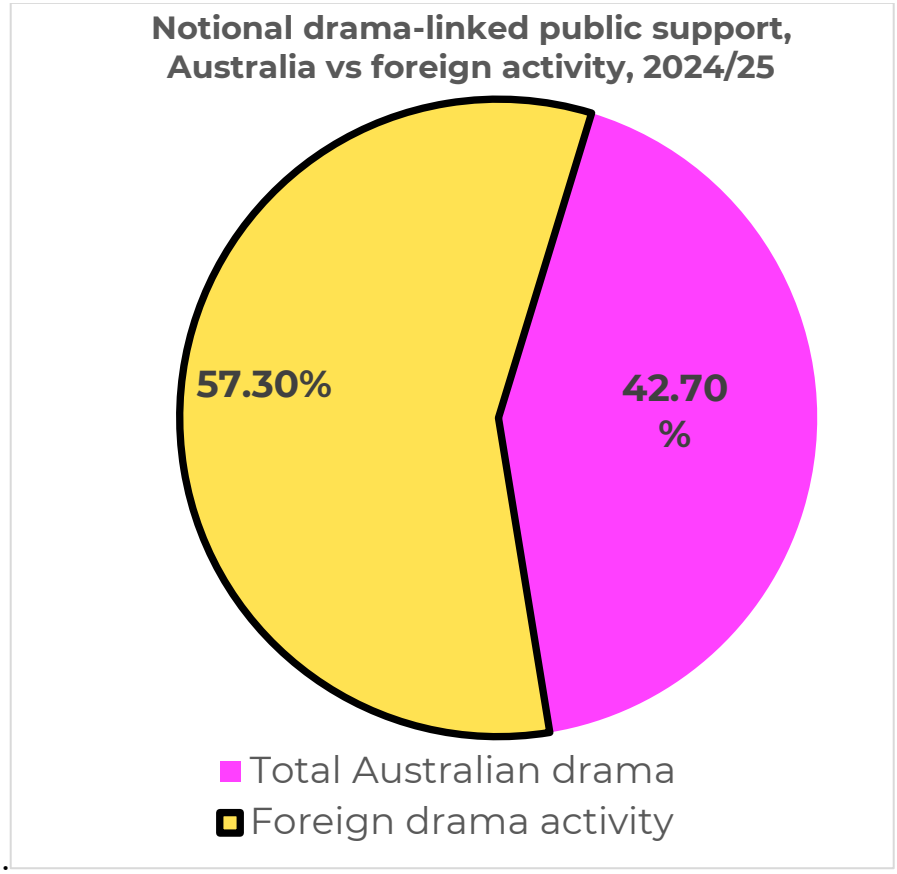


Chart: A rate-corrected drama model suggests the majority of drama-linked public support now sits with foreign activity.

The longer-term trend reinforces the point. Using the same indicative approach across the last ten Screen Australia Drama Reports, the estimated foreign share of offset-supported expenditure has moved significantly over time, but the direction is clear. In the latest year, the estimated foreign share reaches **60.0 per cent**.

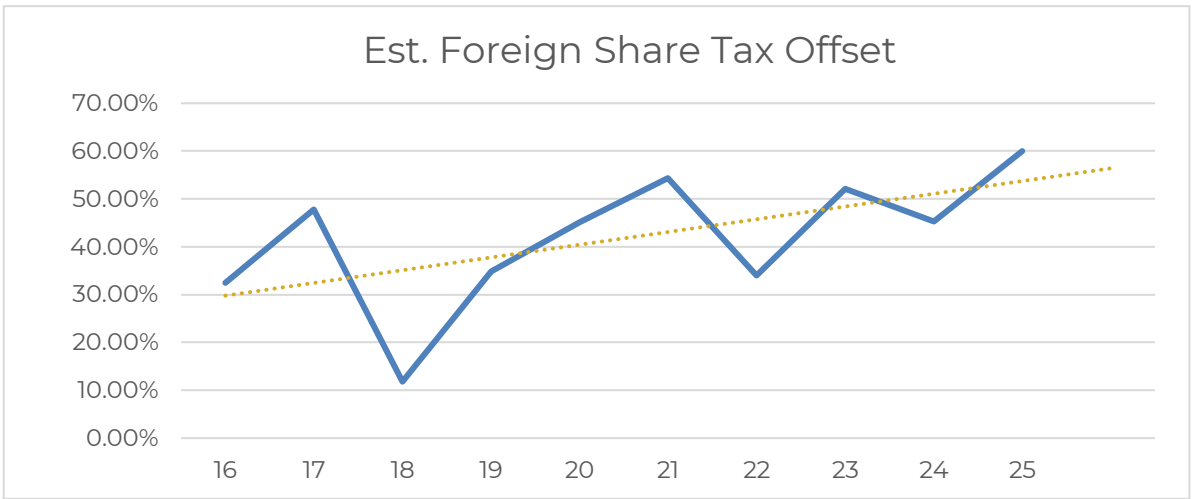


Chart: Estimated foreign share of offset-supported expenditure, ten-year Drama Report series
The indicative foreign share has fluctuated year to year, but the trendline points upward, with the latest estimate reaching 60.0 per cent.

This matters because the public conversation often treats production incentives as support for “the Australian screen industry” in aggregate. But that phrase conceals a major distinction. Some support flows to Australian-owned or Australian-controlled creative production. Some flows to international productions that bring valuable employment and expenditure to Australia, but are not Australian cultural works and are not controlled by Australian entities.

Both forms of activity can have economic value. But they are not the same policy outcome. If the purpose of public screen support is to build Australian stories, Australian companies, Australian audience relationships and long-term Australian cultural value, then the ownership and control question cannot be treated as secondary.

7.7 Administration Is Not the Problem

It is important to be clear about what this argument is not. Australia’s screen system does not appear to be administratively bloated.

Screen Australia itself allocates roughly 8 per cent of its budget to administration, which is broadly consistent with a lean public agency. Even allowing for the overheads of the NFSA, Ausfilm and the state screen agencies, total system-wide administrative cost is likely in the order of $100 million to $110 million per year.

Against a system of roughly $1.3 billion, that is around 8 per cent.

Administration is not the issue. The system appears relatively efficient in how it operates. The issue is where the money goes.

Australia’s screen system is not admin-heavy. It is production-heavy.

7.8 Australia as an Outlier

Australia is not unusual because it supports screen production. It is unusual because it does so at scale while giving comparatively weak structural weight to audience encounter.

Comparable countries pair production support with:

- audience development mechanisms
- exhibition support or regulation
- circulation strategies
- performance tracking
- transparent reporting of outcomes

Australia’s system is distinctive in that it:

- concentrates support at the production stage
- separates funding from audience accountability
- treats exhibition as downstream rather than integral

The result is a system that can sustain:

- increasing production
- high public investment
- visible industry activity

while simultaneously experiencing:

- declining admissions per film
- reduced audience reach
- weaker theatrical presence

That is not a market anomaly. It is a policy outcome.

7.9 The Structural Consequence

Responsibility for audience encounter is deferred across the system:

- from funder to producer
- from producer to distributor
- from distributor to exhibitor
- from exhibitor to “the market”

At each stage, the obligation weakens.

No single actor is clearly accountable for ensuring that a publicly supported film is actually seen by Australians at scale.

The system functions. But it does not connect.

7.10 Institutional Capacity and Continuity

This weakness is not only financial. It is institutional.

A system cannot take audience outcomes seriously without the capability to track, understand and act on them.

Within a production-led model, capability tends to concentrate around development and production. By contrast, capability at the point of release, exhibition engagement and audience measurement is less consistently embedded.

Where staffing structures rely heavily on short-term contracts, project-based roles or fragmented responsibility across teams, several consequences follow:

- institutional memory weakens

- cross-project learning is inconsistent
- market intelligence is not systematically retained
- relationships with exhibitors and distributors become episodic
- responsibility for audience outcomes becomes diffused

Short-term employment structures can also have a more subtle effect. Where future work depends heavily on relationships within the same sector, the incentive to give blunt internal advice, to challenge weak market assumptions, or to deliver hard criticism at script and development stage may be reduced. This is not a question of bad faith. It is a structural condition that can soften candour and narrow the range of advice a system is willing to hear.

The timing mismatch is also significant. Development executives are often appointed on two-year contracts, with many receiving only one further extension. Yet a feature film may take five to seven years to move from development through production to release. In practice, this means the people making early assessment decisions are often no longer in place when the project reaches the market. They do not see the result through. The system therefore weakens its own capacity to learn from outcomes, because the chain between initial judgement and eventual audience performance is repeatedly broken.

This matters because theatrical release is not an administrative afterthought. It requires continuity, judgement and sustained engagement with the market.

A related problem is the limited weight given to direct theatrical experience within decision-making structures. If, from development assessment through to executive and board approval, too few decision-makers have practical experience of the theatrical ecosystem, including selling tickets, positioning films for audiences, managing release risk, or negotiating the realities of exhibition, then audience logic is more easily displaced by process logic. Projects may be assessed intelligently in creative and policy terms while still being weakly tested against the conditions in which films actually meet the public.

The problem is compounded when investment decisions pass through multiple layers of internal management and board oversight. By the time a project has moved through several levels of assessment, recommendation and approval, responsibility can become so distributed that accountability for downstream audience outcomes is weakened. The result is a system in which many people participate in saying yes, but no one is clearly responsible for what happens once the film enters the market.

This raises a broader governance question. A board's central role is to appoint the chief executive, set strategy, oversee risk and ensure statutory accountability. It is not self-evident that boards are best placed to exercise detailed judgement over individual creative investments, particularly where doing so adds further layers between market reality and decision-making. The more governance structures move from strategic oversight into project-level approval, the greater the risk that responsibility blurs and practical accountability diminishes.

If the system is structurally stronger at assessing films into production than it is at following them into cinemas, that imbalance will reinforce itself over time.

This is not a reflection on individuals. It is a structural characteristic of the system.

7.11 Why Production-Only Solutions Fail

Attempts to correct this imbalance often focus on:

- increasing production budgets
- supporting more projects
- expanding development pipelines

None of these measures addresses the underlying problem.

Audience connection cannot be retrofitted after a film is made.

Without structural requirements around:

- audience strategy
- marketing
- release planning
- exhibition access

Additional production investment sends more supply into a system that is not designed to carry films to audiences.

More films do not automatically mean more audience. They can mean more congestion, less visibility and weaker outcomes.

7.12 The Core Insight and Lead-In to Reform

The problem is not the amount of money in the system. It is where that money goes, what it is designed to achieve, and what is left unmeasured

Australia funds production with precision. It funds audience connection by exception.

Less than one per cent of public screen support is structurally directed to promotion, distribution, exhibition access and audience outcomes.

Until public investment follows films beyond production and into cinemas, and until reporting measures how many Australians actually see Australian films, increased output will continue to coincide with declining admissions.

This is a failure of system design.

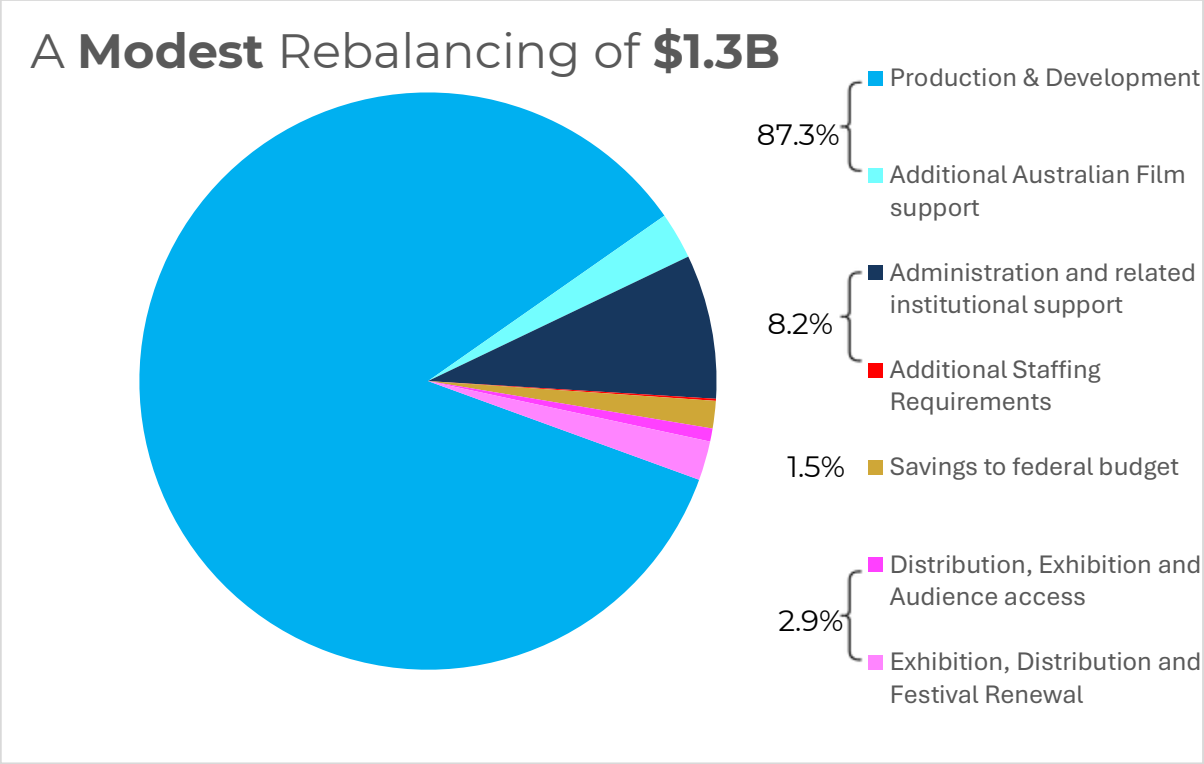


Chart 7.3 — *A modest rebalancing connects public investment to release, access and audience outcomes without increasing overall funding.*

The next chapter turns from funding architecture to the built environment. It examines how planning systems shape whether cinemas exist, where they are located, and whether communities have access to shared cultural space at all.

Audience access is not only a policy question. It is a spatial one.

CHAPTER 8
Planning Frameworks and the Cinema Blind Spot

"Planning is everything. Plans are nothing."
— Dwight D. Eisenhower

When Planning Stares into the Void

Planning documents are designed to explain outcomes. They describe what is present, what is provided for, and what is valued. But they also reveal what is absent, what is unnamed, and what has been excluded from consideration altogether.

When planning frameworks are examined closely, they do not simply reflect the city. They shape it. And when they repeatedly fail to recognise shared cultural infrastructure, that absence does not remain theoretical. It materialises on the ground.

This chapter examines what happens when planning looks closely at the city and finds nothing where shared cultural infrastructure should be, and what that absence reveals about planning itself.

8.1 A Planner's Blind Spot, Laid Bare

The Sydenham–Bankstown Sydney Metro Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), like the Chatswood–Sydenham leg before it, does more than overlook cinemas and cultural venues. It excludes them from the planning frame altogether.

This is not a minor omission. It reflects a way of seeing the city.

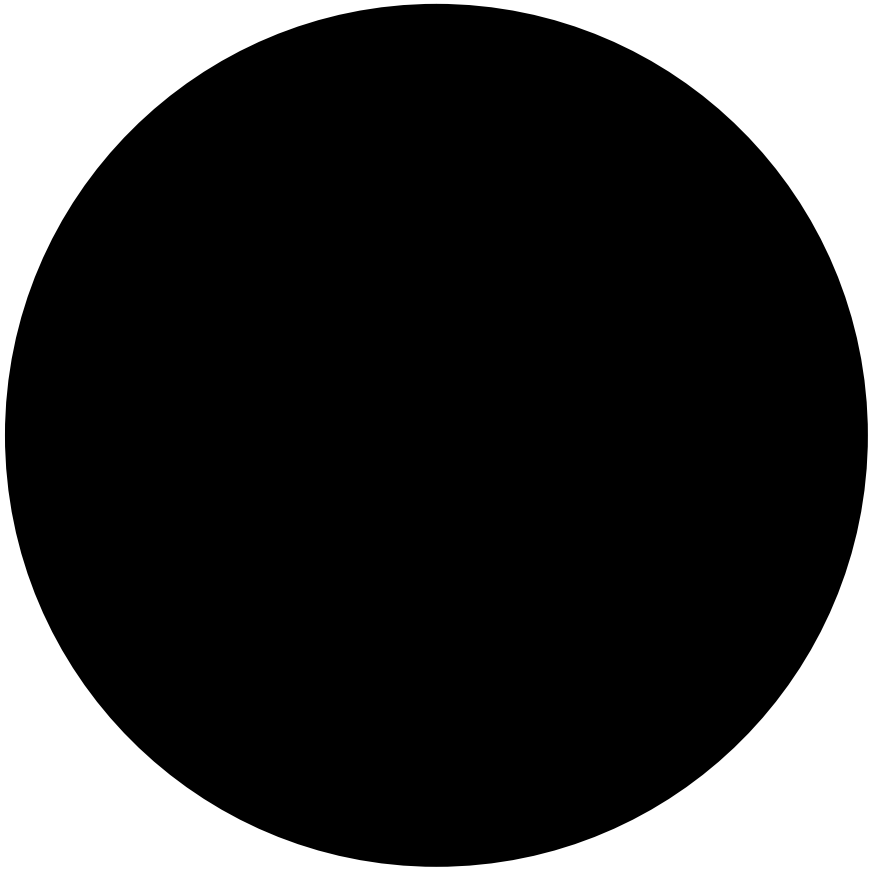
Under the EIS framework adopted by Sydney Metro and endorsed by NSW planning authorities:

- clubs with poker machines are recognised as social and economic infrastructure
- licensed venues are acknowledged as contributors to "activation"
- alcohol- and gambling-based land uses are named, mapped and assessed

By contrast, cinemas, theatres and cultural venues are not recognised as civic infrastructure at all. They are not treated as social infrastructure, community facilities, cultural assets, places of participation, destinations, or equity-relevant amenities.

In practical terms, they do not exist in the planner's universe.

NSW Planning: When You Stare Into the **Void**



No slice**. No** category**. No** civic place**.**

Environmental Impact Statements measure what planners believe counts. Across both Metro EISs, the planning logic is consistent:

- movement counts
- yield counts
- noise receptors count
- heritage fabric counts
- poker-machine revenue counts

Shared cultural participation does not.

Cinema is effectively rendered invisible because the planning framework treats it as:

- “commercial”
- “optional”
- “market-provided”
- “non-essential”

This is planning shorthand for a single conclusion: no public responsibility is assumed.

8.2 The Result: Density Without Civic Life

Between Waterloo and Bankstown, the Metro corridor serves:

- more than 360,000 residents
- some of the most linguistically diverse communities in the country
- younger-than-average populations
- declining SES gradients moving south-west

Yet the EIS does not assess:

- walkable access to cinemas
- access to shared indoor cultural venues
- night-time civic destinations beyond alcohol-led uses
- the cumulative loss or absence of cultural gathering places

Culture could be removed entirely from the planning vocabulary and the outcome would be unchanged.

Density, as it is currently planned, produces murals instead of venues. It delivers "activation" without anyone staying. It creates movement without destination, and growth without gathering. That is the emptiness at the heart of contemporary place-making.

The same planning system that celebrates "vibrant precincts", speaks constantly about "place-making", and invokes "community activation" refuses to name the single most widely attended cultural venue in Australia.

8.3 Place-Making Without Places

Place-making has become the language planners use when they are no longer willing to plan for places.

It signals intention without obligation, aspiration without delivery, and culture without institutions.

Murals are installed where venues should be. Wayfinding signage appears where destinations are missing. Activation is promised where participation has not been designed.

A place is not made by signage packages, slogans or tactical interventions. It is made by permanent, shared and repeatable reasons for people to gather.

Cinema provides that. Contemporary place-making, too often, avoids it.

Heritage Remembered, Living Culture Ignored

The EIS will catalogue historic buildings, document former land uses, and protect bricks and facades. But it does not plan for where people gather now, where they will gather in future, or where shared civic life actually occurs.

Dead culture is protected. Living culture is erased.

That is the deeper planning failure.

Was This Blindness Present from the Beginning?

Yes.

Once cinemas were removed from screen policy, funding frameworks and cultural infrastructure definitions, they also disappeared from transport planning, precinct planning and the logic of EIS assessment.

The planner did not simply miss cinemas. The system no longer regarded them as part of what planning was there to see.

The Sydney Metro EIS treats poker machines as social infrastructure and cinemas as non-existent. That is not a neutral market outcome. It is a planning value judgement.

8.4 End of the Line?

This is a planning failure of imagination, responsibility and civic intent.

The system moved people efficiently. It never asked why they might want to stay.

Waterloo received a mural. It did not receive a place to gather.

That is not only a planning failure. It is a cultural one.

When shared spaces are not planned for, they do not emerge by accident. And when they disappear, what is lost is not just infrastructure, but the conditions for shared experience.

The next chapter turns to what cinema represents within that shared life, and why its disappearance matters beyond policy and planning.

CHAPTER 9
The National Campfire

"Just what this country needs. Another cock in a frock on a rock."
— The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert

Why Cinema Still Matters, and Why Policy Must Catch Up

9.1 The National Campfire

Cinema matters because it is one of the few remaining places where a national story can still become a shared public experience.

A film can be watched alone. It can be streamed, paused, skipped, minimised or consumed in fragments. Those forms of viewing now sit permanently within the screen ecology, and they have value. But they are not the same as cinema.

Cinema asks something different of an audience. It asks people to leave home, gather in a public place, give their attention, sit with strangers and experience a story at the same time. It turns viewing into participation. It gives stories scale, ceremony and consequence.

That is why cinema cannot be understood only as a commercial endpoint in a production chain. It is part of the public life of screen culture. It is where a film moves from being a funded object to being a social event. It is where stories are tested, shared, remembered and argued over. It is where national screen culture becomes visible to itself.

For Australian films, this matters profoundly.

A national cinema is not created by production alone. It is created when films enter public circulation, when audiences have the opportunity to see them, when communities recognise themselves in them, and when the experience of watching becomes part of a broader cultural conversation.

The central question is therefore not only whether Australia can make films. It is whether Australia still has the public settings, release pathways and audience habits that allow those films to matter.

9.2 The Campfire is Not Nostalgia

The idea of cinema as a national campfire should not be mistaken for nostalgia.

The campfire is not an argument for returning to an earlier age of filmgoing. It is a description of what shared culture requires.

A campfire needs a place. It needs people gathered around it. It needs a story strong enough to hold attention. It needs light, warmth, ritual and memory. Cinema provides all of these things in modern civic form.

A cinema turns a film from private content into a public occasion. It allows strangers to laugh together, sit in silence together, be unsettled together and recognise something of themselves, their community or their country in the same moment.

That collective experience changes the meaning of a film. It gives the work a public dimension that cannot be replicated by private consumption alone. A film seen at home may be enjoyed, admired or forgotten. A film seen together can become part of the national imagination.

This is why the campfire matters.

It is not sentimental language. It is infrastructure language. The campfire is the venue, the session, the audience, the ritual of attendance, the social visibility of the work and the conversation that follows. It is the public architecture through which screen culture becomes more than content.

Without that architecture, stories may still be made, but they are less likely to gather a public around them.

9.3 Cinema as Cultural Infrastructure

Public policy has long recognised the value of Australian stories. It supports development, production, talent, documentary, children's content, First Nations storytelling and works of national cultural significance.

That recognition is important. But it is incomplete if it stops at production.

Stories do not complete their public purpose when they are financed, shot, delivered or acquitted. They complete that purpose when they are seen, discussed, absorbed and carried into community memory.

Cinema is one of the principal places where that happens.

It is therefore more accurate to describe cinemas not simply as private businesses, but as cultural infrastructure. Like libraries, galleries, theatres, community halls and local festivals, cinemas provide a public setting for cultural participation. They serve commercial functions, but their public value is broader than their private revenue.

A cinema activates main streets and town centres. It supports the night-time economy. It creates local employment. It gives young people somewhere to go. It provides a platform for festivals, schools, seniors' programs, community fundraisers, local filmmakers, Q&As and special events. It gives regional and suburban communities access to cultural life without requiring them to travel to capital-city institutions.

In many places, the local cinema is one of the few cultural venues used regularly by a broad cross-section of the community. It is familiar, accessible and repeatable. It does not require specialist knowledge. It can serve families, teenagers, retirees, cinephiles, school groups, local councils and community organisations in the same week.

That breadth is part of its public value.

Cinema is popular culture, but it is also civic culture. It is one of the rare places where the popular and the public still meet.

9.4 The difference between availability and access

A common mistake in contemporary screen policy is to confuse availability with access.

A film may be available on a platform, but that does not mean audiences know it exists. It does not mean it has been given visibility, context, positioning or momentum. It does not mean it has entered public conversation. It does not mean communities have had the chance to encounter it together.

Digital availability can be vast and invisible at the same time.

Cinema solves a different problem. It creates public presence. A cinema booking is a signal. A session time is a call to gather. A poster in a foyer, a trailer before another film, a staff recommendation, a filmmaker Q&A, a festival screening or a local media mention can all help turn a title into an event.

This is especially important for Australian films, which often compete against larger international titles with far greater marketing resources, stronger brand recognition and deeper audience awareness.

For these films, the problem is rarely only quality. It is visibility, positioning, timing, confidence and access.

If an Australian film is released without sufficient marketing support, without enough suitable sessions, without local engagement and without a pathway to build momentum, it may technically be available while remaining culturally absent.

That is the danger at the heart of this report.

A film can be made.
A film can be completed.
A film can be listed.
A film can be available.

And still, in any meaningful public sense, it can remain unseen.

9.5 The public value of being seen together

There is a particular value in seeing Australian stories together.

When audiences gather around a local story, they do more than consume content. They participate in a shared act of recognition. They see accents, landscapes, humour, conflict, history, grief, absurdity and beauty that belong to this place. They encounter versions of the country that may affirm them, challenge them or complicate what they think they know.

That experience is not always comfortable. Nor should it be. National cinema is not simply a mirror of consensus. It is also a place of argument, discomfort, dissent and discovery.

But it requires an audience.

A national story without an audience is not yet national in any meaningful sense. It may have been publicly funded. It may be artistically significant. It may deserve attention. But until it reaches people, it has not entered the shared cultural space that public funding is meant to serve.

This is why cinema has a role that cannot be reduced to box office alone.

Box office matters. Commercial performance matters. Audience scale matters. But the public value of cinema is larger than the immediate transaction. A cinema screening can create conversation, local pride, media attention, educational use, festival life, community connection and long-term cultural memory.

The ticket price captures only part of that value.

The rest lives in the people who came, the conversations they had afterwards, the communities that felt included, the filmmakers who saw their work meet an audience, and the national culture that became a little more visible to itself.

9.6 Regional, suburban and independent cinemas

The national campfire does not burn only in capital-city arthouses or flagship festival venues.

It burns in regional towns, outer suburbs, independent multiplexes, family-run cinemas, community halls, restored picture palaces and local venues where the cinema is part of the rhythm of ordinary life.

These places matter because cultural access is not evenly distributed.

For many Australians, particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan communities, the local cinema is the most immediate and affordable form of regular cultural infrastructure. It may be the venue that hosts school excursions, local premieres, charity nights, seniors' screenings, film festivals and community events. It may be the place

where young people first encounter cinema as something larger than a screen in the home.

If these venues weaken or close, the loss is not confined to exhibition revenue. It is a loss of cultural access, local identity and civic capacity.

This is especially important in communities that are already underserved by major cultural institutions. A cinema closure in a well-served inner-city area is a commercial loss. A cinema closure in a regional or outer-suburban area can be a cultural access loss for an entire community.

Public policy should recognise that distinction.

A national screen culture cannot depend only on production companies, festivals and streaming platforms. It also requires a geographically dispersed network of places where audiences can encounter screen culture in public.

That network is fragile. It needs to be treated as infrastructure, not merely as market residue.

9.7 The market alone will not protect the campfire

The market is essential to cinema. It brings discipline, audience feedback, commercial ambition and entrepreneurial energy. Cinemas are businesses, and they must remain businesses if they are to be sustainable.

But the market alone will not necessarily protect the full public value of cinema.

The market will favour the films with the strongest immediate demand, the highest awareness, the largest marketing campaigns and the least perceived risk. That is rational. Cinemas must fill seats, pay staff, meet rent, service debt, upgrade equipment and survive volatile trading conditions.

But public cultural value does not always align neatly with short-term commercial certainty.
Australian films, documentaries, First Nations stories, regional stories, culturally specific works, new filmmakers and formally ambitious films may require more careful release planning, stronger marketing support, longer audience development and more confident exhibition access than the market can provide unaided.

This does not mean every film should be protected from commercial reality. Nor does it mean public support should ignore audience behaviour. On the contrary, public support should be more audience-focused, not less.

But it does mean that a purely market-led pathway will not reliably deliver the cultural outcomes public screen investment claims to value.

If Australia wants a diverse national cinema, it must support not only the making of films, but the conditions that allow those films to meet audiences.

9.8 The missing public compact

The current public compact is incomplete.

Australia asks taxpayers to support screen production because national stories matter. It asks filmmakers to develop and deliver those stories. It asks producers to assemble finance. It asks agencies to assess cultural and creative value. It asks the public system to report on expenditure, activity and output.

But it does not ask enough of the system after the film is made.

It does not consistently require audience strategy as a condition of support.
It does not adequately fund marketing readiness.
It does not sufficiently coordinate release planning.
It does not adequately protect exhibition access.
It does not systematically measure admissions, sessions, reach, regional availability or public outcomes.

As a result, the public compact can stop too early.

The system can declare success at the point of production while the public purpose remains unresolved. A film can be funded, completed and reported as an output without ever being given a fair chance to become a public experience.

That is the central failure this report identifies.

It is not a failure of intention. It is a failure of alignment.

The system believes in Australian stories. But it has not yet built the full pathway required for those stories to gather an audience.

9.9 Keeping the Fire Alight

The campfire does not shine because a story was written.

It shines because people came.

That is the part of screen culture Australia has allowed to weaken. We have invested in the making of stories, but not sufficiently in the gathering around them. We have funded production with precision and treated audience connection as an afterthought.

A national cinema culture cannot survive on files, platforms and funded completions alone. It needs places. It needs rituals. It needs public visibility. It needs the ordinary civic magic of people leaving their homes, sitting together in the dark and seeing a story become larger than themselves.

This is not an argument against streaming, television or digital access. Those pathways are now essential parts of screen culture. But they do not replace the public function of cinema. They do not replace the value of a local venue, a shared audience, a scheduled event, a collective reaction and a story that becomes visible in community life.

The task is not to choose between old and new forms of viewing. The task is to ensure that Australia does not lose the public form altogether.

If public policy accepts that Australian stories matter, it must accept that the public places where those stories are seen also matter.

If the fire is to keep burning, Australia must support more than the making of films. It must support the places, pathways and public rituals through which films become part of national life.

A film that is made but not seen remains an object of production.

A film that is seen together can become memory, argument, identity, affection, dissent, pride and belonging.

That is why cinema matters.

That is why the campfire matters.

And that is why it must be kept alight.

Setting Up the Structural Diagnosis

The preceding chapters have shown that audience disconnection is not a creative failure, a market failure, or a failure of demand. It is the cumulative result of funding settings, planning decisions and institutional habits that stop short of the point where films meet the public.

The next chapter draws those findings together and sets out the structural conclusions that follow from the evidence.

Buckley explaining the Hunger Games, Easter 2026

CHAPTER 10

Findings

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."
— Oscar Wilde

Evidence Base

The findings in this chapter are drawn from the full body of research underpinning *Made, Not Seen*, including longitudinal box-office and admissions analysis, historical admissions benchmarking, SA3 population and socio-economic overlays, cinema access and screen-density mapping, language and cultural alignment analysis, release-date performance modelling, marketing asset audits, premium format review, and international policy comparison.

These findings are grounded in structural conditions observable across multiple datasets and timeframes.

Major Structural Findings

Finding 1 — Production Has Expanded While Audience Reach Has Contracted

Australian feature film output has increased materially since the creation of Screen Australia and the introduction of the Producer Offset. Over the same period, admissions per Australian film have declined significantly.

The divergence between production volume and audience reach indicates a system that measures activity more reliably than impact. More films are being made, but fewer Australians are seeing each one.

This divergence is structural rather than cyclical. It cannot be explained simply by changing taste, temporary market volatility or the performance of individual titles. It reflects a deeper misalignment between what the system is designed to support and what audiences are actually able to encounter.

Finding 2 — National Screen Policy Is Structurally Weighted Towards Production, Not Audiences

Public screen funding is overwhelmingly concentrated at the development and production stages. By contrast, marketing readiness, theatrical release planning,

exhibition access, admissions tracking and post-release evaluation receive comparatively weak structural attention.

Responsibility for audience connection is diffused and inconsistently enforced. No single institutional mechanism is clearly accountable for ensuring that publicly supported films achieve measurable audience reach.

The result is a system that is highly capable of activating production, but weak at governing the conditions under which films are actually seen.

Finding 3 — Exhibition and Audience Access Sit Outside the Core Statutory Frame

The Screen Australia Act does not explicitly incorporate exhibition, cinema access or admissions outcomes as core statutory functions.

In practice, what is not mandated is not systematically measured. What is not measured is not managed.

The exclusion of exhibition and audience access from the statutory frame has created a structural blind spot in national screen policy. Without a formal requirement to observe how films reach audiences in cinemas, the system lacks the feedback loop necessary to assess performance, identify failure and adjust policy settings in response.

Finding 4 — Incentive Design Privileges Production Spend Over Market Readiness

Current funding and tax offset settings prioritise qualifying expenditure and production completion. Marketing asset readiness, audience testing, release preparedness and commercial-grade promotional compliance are not consistently enforced as mandatory conditions of public support.

The removal or weakening of structured market-testing disciplines, combined with the privileging of completion over release readiness, has materially weakened the theatrical preparedness of the Australian slate.

Policy settings shape behaviour. Where incentives reward spend, spend is optimised. Where incentives do not reward audience readiness, readiness declines.

Finding 5 — Australia Lacks the Audience and Access Metrics Needed for Policy Accountability

Australia has no consolidated national session dataset, no consistent public reporting of screen access by title, and no standardised system of admissions benchmarking across time.

Public reporting remains heavily oriented towards expenditure, project counts and production activity rather than audience reach. Admissions appear episodically when results are strong, but do not function as a consistent core measure of policy success.

Without admissions, access and reach as structural indicators, policy effectiveness cannot be objectively evaluated. The absence of these measures removes the feedback loop necessary for adaptive governance and weakens the capacity of government, agencies and industry to learn from actual audience behaviour.

Finding 6 — Cinema Exhibition Renewal Is a National Policy Gap

Australia does not maintain a coherent national framework for cinema exhibition renewal or capital replacement.

Digital infrastructure installed during the Virtual Print Fee conversion period is now reaching end-of-life. Pandemic-era losses depleted reserves across the exhibition sector. No structural replacement mechanism has been established to preserve access where capital exhaustion is most acute.

As this pressure intensifies, especially in regional and outer-metropolitan areas, cinema access contracts. This is not simply a business-cycle problem. It is a structural policy gap. Without intervention, the country risks gradual but irreversible loss of screens, particularly in communities already underserved by shared cultural infrastructure.

Finding 7 — Planning Systems Do Not Protect Cinemas as Civic and Cultural Infrastructure

Urban planning, transport and land-use frameworks do not generally treat cinemas or exhibition venues as essential civic or cultural infrastructure.

In growth and densification corridors, planning instruments prioritise housing yield, retail and other higher-return land uses without systematically assessing the loss or absence of shared cultural venues. This has contributed to the incremental erosion of cinema access, particularly in outer-metropolitan and population-growth areas.

The result is not random. It reflects a planning logic that treats cultural participation as market-provided rather than as a public good requiring deliberate design, protection and renewal.

Supporting Findings

Supporting Finding A — Genre and Classification Output Is Misaligned With Broad Audience Demand

Australian production patterns continue to undersupply family, comedy and broadly accessible PG-classified films, while oversupplying adult drama and documentary with comparatively limited theatrical reach.

Audience data indicates stronger performance where titles are genre-clear, audience-legible and broadly accessible. The issue is not that Australian audiences reject local films as such, but that the slate is too often misaligned with the genres and classifications most likely to support sustained theatrical attendance.

Supporting Finding B — Cultural and Linguistic Alignment Is Measurable

SA3 regions with high Language Other Than English populations demonstrate strong attendance for Indian, East Asian and Middle Eastern cinema. Cultural alignment correlates strongly with geography and demographic concentration.

Australian production does not consistently reflect this multilingual reality. Cultural misalignment is therefore not anecdotal. It is measurable.

Supporting Finding C — Release Timing Remains Structurally Misaligned

Australian films frequently compete with one another and with major international releases due to the absence of national slate coordination, school-holiday protection mechanisms and dating discipline.

Festival settings can compound this problem where publicity rules and release windows discourage momentum from converting into theatrical access. Without reform to release coordination and calendar logic, Australian titles continue to compress into narrow windows, compete against one another and diminish their own reach.

Supporting Finding D — Festivals Function as Audience Infrastructure, but Are Not Funded as Such

Film festivals function as discovery platforms, audience gateways and, in some markets, essential parts of the theatrical access pipeline. Yet funding structures continue to treat them largely as episodic events rather than as infrastructure within the broader audience system.

This limits their long-term strategic value and weakens their ability to support sustained release pathways, regional access and audience development.

What the Evidence Demands

The cumulative evidence demonstrates that the current national screen framework, as established through policy design, funding architecture and legislation, prioritises production volume and expenditure while failing to structurally incorporate audience reach, exhibition access and cinema infrastructure as core policy objectives.

The resulting misalignment is systemic. It reflects design choices that limit the system's ability to measure, manage and improve audience outcomes. In this sense, the framework does not merely underperform. It constrains its own capacity to course-correct.

The recommendations that follow respond directly to these structural limitations.

CHAPTER 11
Recommendations

"When the Lord closes a door,
Somewhere he opens a window."
— The Sound of Music

In the spirit of my grandmother, a woman of firm convictions about the social purpose of a Labor government, the inevitable return of the glory days of Easts, and an unshakeable faith in Jesus Christ and His holy and apostolic Catholic Church, notwithstanding the best efforts of the nuns of St Clare, and who also loved a Saturday matinee at the Star in Bondi Junction, this report is not agnostic

It is intentionally focused on theatrical exhibition, where audience access is measurable, public outcomes are most visible, and the communal ritual of storytelling continues to operate at national scale, welcoming more than a million Australians this week in 473 venues across the country.

The recommendations in this chapter focus specifically on feature film and theatrical exhibition, where the evidence base in Made, Not Seen is deepest and most complete. This reflects both the author's professional experience and the availability of long-run admissions, access and performance data in the cinema sector.

Television, episodic content, games and emerging screen forms operate under distinct industrial, audience and distribution dynamics. Practitioners and policymakers working in those areas are best placed to articulate the reforms required within their own domains, informed by the specific conditions and evidence relevant to those forms.

Nothing in this report precludes or diminishes the importance of those conversations. On the contrary, it is intended to encourage them. The same level of scrutiny applied here to film and exhibition would be both welcome and necessary across the broader screen ecosystem.

11A. Screen Policy Reform

11.1 Amend the Screen Australia Act

Evidence: Exhibition and audience access determine whether public investment reaches Australians, yet they are absent from the Act's statutory design. Admissions per film have collapsed despite increased production, and audience connection is not structurally embedded in policy.

Policy failure: The final link between film and audience is treated as peripheral rather than core business.

Reform: Amend the Screen Australia Act 2008 to include exhibition and audience access as core statutory functions.

Outcome: Public investment is reconnected to public encounter. Responsibility for the final link in the value chain is restored.

11.2 Enforce Marketing Deliverables

Evidence: Late or inadequate assets correlate with poor access and short theatrical runs.

Policy failure: Marketing materials are treated as optional or secondary.

Reform: Mandate minimum marketing deliverables, including trailers, posters and stills, with quality assessment and delivery timelines aligned to release windows.

Outcome: Films enter cinemas market-ready.

11.3 Modernise QAPE

Evidence: Professional marketing assets are often created after production, once the finished film and its audience are clearer.

Policy failure: Current rules discourage good practice by privileging early expenditure rather than final market readiness.

Reform: Make marketing assets QAPE-eligible regardless of when they are produced.

Outcome: Audience thinking is embedded in production planning.

11.4 Create a National Slate Strategy

Evidence: Uncoordinated release dates drive cannibalisation and suppress audience reach.

Policy failure: No national scheduling discipline exists.

Reform: Establish protected release windows and greater genre balance nationally.

Outcome: Exhibitor confidence improves and performance becomes more measurable.

11.5 Integrate Audience Metrics into Funding

Evidence: Audience outcomes do not materially influence future investment decisions.

Policy failure: Success is defined by completion rather than reach.

Reform: Require projects to be assessed against genre demand, classification reach and historical performance evidence where relevant.

Outcome: Funding aligns more closely with audiences.

11.6 National Cinema Access and Data Reporting

Evidence: Policy currently operates without consistent visibility of sessions, reach or access.

Policy failure: Data is fragmented, unpublished or not collected in a form useful for policy correction.

Reform: Publish annual theatrical reports, session datasets and regional access maps.

Outcome: Policy becomes evidence-based rather than assumption-based.

11.7 Marketing and Audience Development Fund

Evidence: Australian films routinely enter the theatrical market without professional, cinema-ready marketing assets. Trailers, posters and stills are often produced late, under-tested, or constrained by financing and offset compliance timelines rather than audience needs. This limits discoverability regardless of a film's quality.

Policy failure: Marketing support is ad hoc, fragmented and under-resourced. There is no standing mechanism to ensure that publicly supported films meet minimum marketing-readiness standards, nor any systematic education for producers about audience-facing requirements. As a result, marketing quality is inconsistent and accountability diffuse.

Reform: Establish a standing Marketing and Audience Development Fund supporting approximately 75 films annually, scaled by release ambition and pathway.

The fund should be supported by a dedicated Marketing Education and Compliance Officer within the agency, responsible for setting minimum, cinema-appropriate marketing asset standards; providing early guidance to producers on audience identification and asset planning; ensuring deliverables are exhibition-ready at the point of release; and embedding marketing literacy as a normal part of production, not a post hoc fix.

This role is educative and facilitative, not punitive, and exists to raise baseline capability across the sector.

In addition to title-specific support, the fund should support occasional sector-wide public-facing campaigns where a unified national message delivers greater impact than fragmented, film-by-film activity.

Outcome: Australian films enter the market with clearer positioning, usable assets and stronger audience awareness. Discoverability improves and marketing effectiveness lifts without increasing overall production budgets or film volume. Public investment only delivers public value when the public knows it exists.

11.8 Screen Australia Workforce and Capability Reform

Evidence: Short contracts and diffuse responsibility erode institutional memory.

Policy failure: There is no clear ownership of audience outcomes, and institutional continuity is weakened by over-reliance on staffing pathways that move quickly between agency and industry.

Reform: Create permanent roles in development, investment management, theatrical analysis, marketing compliance, exhibition engagement and slate planning.

Outcome: Accountability is restored and audience outcomes gain institutional weight.

11.9 A Unified System with Distinct Pathways, Plus a Strategic Intervention Reserve

Reform: Reorganise Screen Australia funding into distinct streams with explicit annual targets for volume, budget and purpose, and publish a one-page Policy Intent Statement each year so government can clearly state what it chose to prioritise.

Owner: Screen Australia, for design and delivery, and Government, for budget settings and public policy statement.

Instruments: published funding architecture, including streams and pathways; annual Policy Intent Statement released with budget outcomes; stream-level KPIs and a public acquittal against them; and machine-readable tables for transparency and comparability.

Timing: Design within six months. Transition over 12 to 18 months. First Policy Intent Statement published for the next financial year.

Every project should be clear about what it is, which pathway it is seeking funding under, and who it is for. Clarity does not limit ambition. It aligns intent, assessment and outcome.

Governance outcome: Policy trade-offs become visible, success is defined by pathway-appropriate outcomes rather than completion, and the public can see what was prioritised, funded and achieved.

11.10 Separate Development from Investment Decision-Making

Evidence: Projects are frequently green-lit on creative improvement rather than demonstrated audience readiness.

Policy failure: Script and talent development are blended with investment assessment, allowing optimism and internal momentum to substitute for market testing, release discipline and audience logic.

Reform: Formally separate development and investment into distinct, sequential functions with equal status, clear boundaries and differentiated responsibilities. Development should strengthen creative ambition, cultural voice and practitioner capability. Investment should determine whether a project should be made now, at this scale, with public money, with explicit attention to audience identification, release strategy, marketing readiness and risk.

Outcome: Creative risk is protected, audience accountability is restored, fewer projects advance without a viable pathway, filmmaker expectations are clearer, and public investment aligns more closely with public outcome.

11.11 Establish a National Exhibition Renewal Program

Targeted exhibition support works. International evidence demonstrates that direct, targeted support for cinema exhibition improves access, stabilises venues and strengthens national film outcomes.

Objective: Stabilise and renew Australia's cinema network as cultural infrastructure, ensuring equitable access, technological relevance and audience reach across metropolitan, outer-suburban and regional communities.

Principle: If federal funds support screen production, they carry an obligation to ensure Australians can access those stories in cinemas.

Program elements:

1. Capital renewal: create a national fund to support digital projection and server replacement, sound upgrades, accessibility works and energy-efficiency improvements.
2. Phased investment: provide $40 million per year in years one and two, followed by $20 million per year for three years.
3. Access conditions: participating cinemas must provide reasonable access for Australian films, maintain session density, contribute to national reporting, and engage with coordinated release strategies.
4. Equity weighting: prioritise outer-metropolitan growth corridors, regional centres, lower-SES areas and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
5. Administration: establish a dedicated Exhibition Renewal Unit with expertise in cinema operations, capital planning, access metrics and audience outcomes.

Rationale: The program addresses capital exhaustion, access inequity, declining session density and the absence of exhibition in national policy, reconnecting production, distribution and exhibition into a single value chain.

11B. Planning Reform

The first eleven recommendations address failures within screen policy and funding systems. The following recommendations address the external planning systems that now guarantee those failures will persist unless corrected.

11.12 Recognise Cinemas as Civic and Cultural Infrastructure

Evidence: Cinema access is declining fastest in outer-metropolitan growth corridors and newly densifying precincts, despite population growth sufficient to support viable cinemas.

Policy failure: Planning frameworks continue to treat cinemas as discretionary commercial uses rather than essential civic and cultural infrastructure.

Reform: recognise cinemas alongside libraries, performance venues and community facilities within state and local planning instruments; require explicit assessment and mitigation where cinemas are removed from centres, renewal areas or transport-oriented precincts; and treat loss of cinema access as a material planning impact.

Outcome: Cultural access is protected as populations grow, rather than eroded through incremental planning decisions.

11.13 Embed Cinema Access in Metro and Growth-Corridor Planning

Evidence: Metro extensions and growth-corridor planning are serving hundreds of thousands of residents across diverse and rapidly growing communities, many of which currently lack walkable or transit-connected cinema access.

Policy failure: Major transport and urban-renewal projects proceed without cultural-infrastructure benchmarks, resulting in density without shared civic destinations.

Reform: require provision for cinemas and cultural venues within major station precincts and associated rezoning areas; use admissions data and station-level catchment analysis to guide appropriate scale and location; align state planning objectives with national screen policy goals around access and participation; and apply cultural-infrastructure benchmarks to ensure growing populations are served by civic venues, not just housing supply.

Outcome: Transport investment delivers cultural access and civic life, not residential density alone.

11.14 Priority Intervention: Canterbury-Bankstown

Canterbury-Bankstown requires immediate and targeted cultural-infrastructure planning. Despite sustained population growth and a vibrant multicultural community, the area remains profoundly underserved in cinema and cultural-venue provision.

Only one cinema venue comprising eight screens currently serves the local government area.

The Sydney Metro Southwest will unlock major urban transformation, but through a cultural-infrastructure void.

Planning response required: designate Canterbury-Bankstown as a Priority Cultural Infrastructure Zone; mandate the inclusion of cinema and cultural venues in station-precinct planning, particularly between Dulwich Hill and Punchbowl; and embed screen-culture access as a planning objective in state-led rezonings and local planning amendments affecting the region.

Without intervention, Metro Southwest will open into a cultural-venue wasteland, undermining national screen-policy goals and deepening infrastructure inequity in one of Sydney's most underserved cultural regions.

11C. Festival Reform

Festivals are part of audience infrastructure, not peripheral events.

11.15 Festivals as Audience Infrastructure

Film festivals function as discovery platforms and audience gateways, particularly in regions with limited year-round cultural programming. However, funding structures treat festivals as episodic events rather than as infrastructure within the audience pipeline, constraining their long-term impact.

A long-term funding model should be established for each capital-city to ensure festivals of national significance, with tiered recognition reflecting international, national, contender standing. Funding should shift from episodic event grants to structured, performance-linked multi-year agreements that reward audience growth, touring pathways, regional access and integration with theatrical release strategies.

Festivals must operate as launchpads into sustained exhibition life, not as holding environments disconnected from national distribution planning.

11.16 Bring Back the BIFF: A Queensland Festival System Reset

Evidence: South-East Queensland now functions as a single, continuous metropolitan corridor with a population scale large enough to sustain a nationally significant capital-city festival, yet Queensland lacks a stable institution operating at that level.

Policy failure: Festival delivery in Queensland has been treated as an event-based activity rather than as cultural infrastructure. Responsibility has been dispersed across short-term entities, competitive tenders and project funding.

Reform: establish a Queensland Festival Delivery Authority with a permanent, underwritten workforce and responsibility for delivering Brisbane International Film

Festival, a Gold Coast edition, a Sunshine Coast satellite as the market matures, and a coherent statewide touring and regional program.

Outcome: Queensland gains a stable, nationally credible capital-city festival operating across its true metropolitan footprint, supported by professional governance, long-term audience development and permanent delivery capability.

11.17 National Festival Tiers and Baseline Funding Framework

Festival support should operate within a national, population-weighted baseline framework recognising festivals as essential cultural infrastructure.

A capital-city tier, a capital-city preferred contender tier, a regional showcase tier and a specialty tier should be defined with clear eligibility criteria, anti-tier-creep protections, independent governance requirements and measurable audience outcomes.

Baseline funding should be automatic, recurrent, indexed and population-weighted. This framework does not guarantee success. It guarantees stability, continuity and accountability.

Baseline Funding Framework with Population Weighting

Tier	Baseline scale	Population weighting	Intent
Capital-city	100% anchor level + 25% bonus for international standing	Indexed to state or territory population and metropolitan catchment	National showcase and international gateway
Capital-city preferred contender	65–85% of capital baseline	Indexed to state or territory population and metropolitan catchment	Bring festival up to national showcase level
Regional showcase	35–50% of capital baseline	Weighted by regional population served, distance from capital access, and visitor draw	Strategic access and destination impact
Specialty	25–40% of capital baseline	Weighted by national audience reach rather than location	Form and audience diversity

What Must Change

These recommendations are not offered as a wish list, nor as an argument for preserving existing settings with marginal improvement. They are a structural response to a structural problem.

The evidence in Made, Not Seen shows that Australian screen policy has become heavily weighted toward production while neglecting the conditions that allow films to be found, accessed and experienced by the public. Audience reach, exhibition access, release discipline, marketing readiness and cultural infrastructure have been treated as secondary matters, when in truth they are the mechanisms through which public value is realised.

What is proposed here is not less ambition, but greater coherence. Not fewer films, but clearer purpose. Not nostalgia for an earlier cinema economy, but a contemporary policy framework that recognises how audiences actually live, choose and gather.

If public funding is to justify itself culturally, economically and politically, it must do more than support the making of work. It must help ensure that work reaches Australians in meaningful ways, in places that remain visible, shared and public.

That requires reconnecting policy to audience, production to exhibition, and cultural aspiration to practical access.

The recommendations in this chapter are designed to do exactly that.

Chapter 12 turns from diagnosis and reform to a broader proposition: how the system might be reassembled once Audience is restored as the feedback loop, and how Australian screen culture might move from drift to renewal.

CHAPTER 12
The Reboot

"Shoot Straight, you bastards
Don't make a mess of it"
— Breaker Morant

AUDIENCE IS THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Audience is not the end of the system. Audience is the system's only honest signal.

A screen ecosystem can lie to itself in a hundred ways: project counts, spend, slates, completion milestones, awards, panels, press. Those are internal measures. They describe activity.

12.1 Audience participation describes performance.

When people buy a ticket, show up, and sit in the dark, the whole chain gets tested at once: story alignment, marketing clarity, release logic, access, and cultural fit. No other metric integrates all of that in a single moment. Nothing else tells the system—cleanly—whether the work entered public life.

When that feedback loop is removed, the system becomes deaf.

Production becomes self-referential. Marketing becomes perfunctory. Dating becomes arbitrary. Exhibition becomes invisible. Failure gets explained away as "taste" or "the market". And the machine keeps running while public connection collapses.

Cinema is where the signal is clearest because it requires a deliberate choice: physical presence, time-bound commitment, shared participation. A ticket is not passive. It is a decision.

The policy error was treating audience as epilogue—someone else's problem, downstream, optional. The result is not creative failure. It is systemic deafness.

Chapter 12 is the fix.

It rebuilds the feedback loop and then designs the system around it: a disciplined national slate, readiness standards, marketing capability, exhibition renewal, and clear accountability for access and outcomes.

We Broke It. We Can Fix It.

Cinema is not dead. Globally, theatrical attendance rebounds when films are **well made, well marketed, and well timed**. Australian cinema did not fail because audiences walked away. It faltered because the system slowly unthreaded the connection between **story, screen, and community**.

The national campfire dimmed not through lack of talent, imagination, or effort, but through drift, fragmentation, and the absence of clear ownership for audience outcomes.

This chapter sets out how to rebuild it.

Not through sentiment, protectionism, or nostalgia, but through deliberate design, disciplined investment, and shared responsibility.

The Reboot is an operational plan. It restores coordination, accountability, and access so Australian stories can once again be **seen together**, in the dark, by the people they are made for.

12.2 The repaired feedback loop

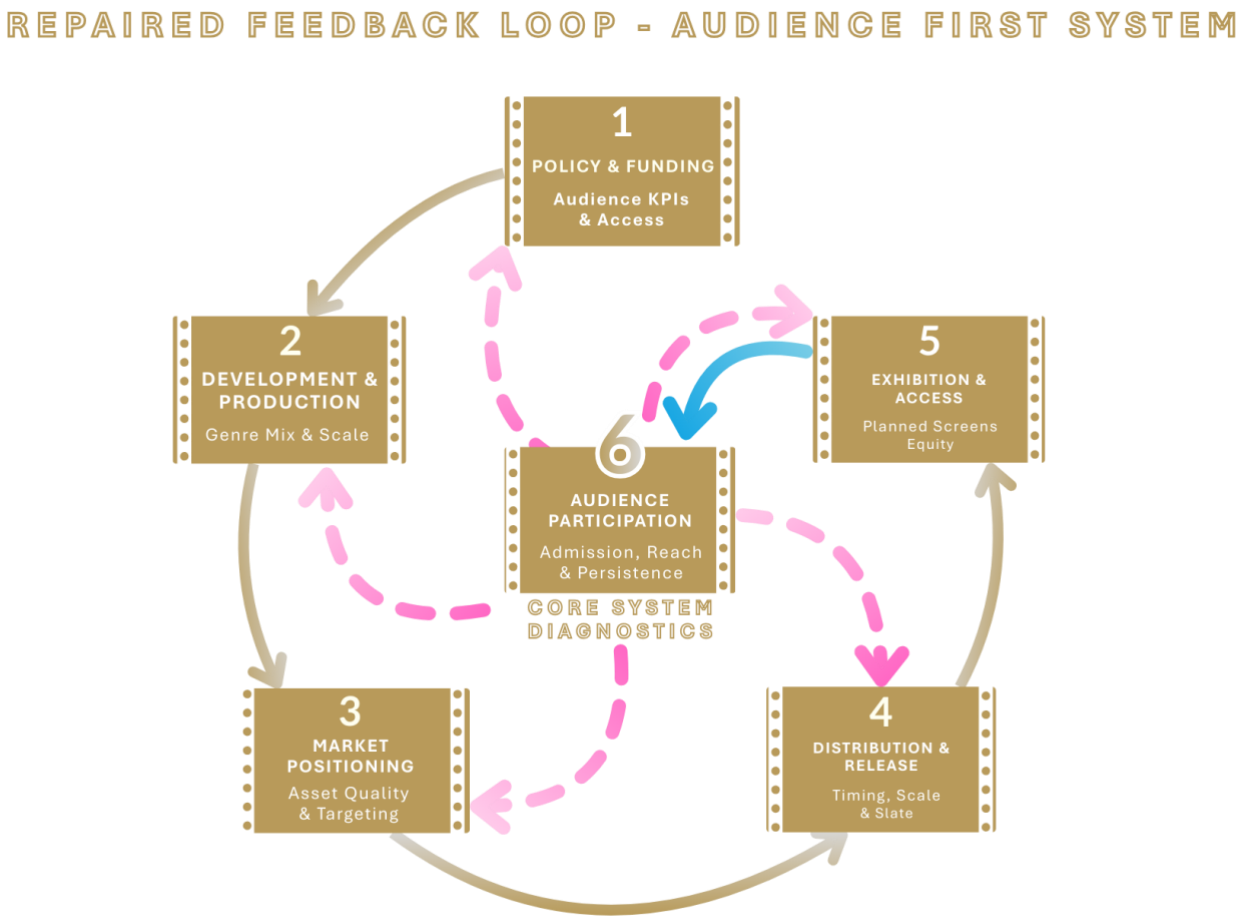


Chart 12.1 sets out the repaired feedback loop that underpins the reforms proposed in this chapter.

In plain terms, the system is rebuilt around one continuous loop:

Audience participation (admissions, access, persistence) becomes the system's core diagnostic input.

That input drives **policy settings and investment decisions** (what gets funded, and why).

Investment decisions enforce **release discipline and readiness standards** (timing, assets, windows, access).

Release outcomes feed back into **slate design, access planning, and the next cycle of funding**—so the system can actually course-correct.

Without the loop, policy becomes faith. With the loop, it becomes governance.

12.3 The 12-Film Australian Theatrical Slate

Design, Discipline, Purpose

The national slate is the operational core of the Reboot.

It is not a quota.

It is not prescriptive programming.

It is not an artistic constraint.

It is a **coordination mechanism** designed to restore confidence, visibility, and audience habit around Australian theatrical film.

At present, Australian films are released opportunistically. Titles cluster, collide with each other, or are pushed into weak windows. Exhibitors cannot plan. Distributors cannot build momentum. Audiences are trained to miss Australian films rather than expect them.

The slate replaces this fragmentation with a disciplined national rhythm: **one Australian theatrical feature released each month**, aligned to priority genres and committed to defined release windows.

This monthly cadence allows the system to make the films audiences need, when they need them, and to support those films properly.

This is not a cap on Australian production. It is a **protected national theatrical pathway** for the subset of films intended to play at scale, build habit, and generate measurable public outcomes.

Participation incentive: the Slate Bonus

Participation in the slate carries a clear incentive.

Films selected for a protected monthly window receive an additional **$2 million Slate Bonus** to their production budget. This is not a reward for volume. It is an incentive for **readiness, coordination, and audience alignment**.

"One film a month, in the right genre, in the right window, with the budget to be seen."

12.4 Budget architecture and slate flexibility

Direct public investment. No ticket clipping.

Of the **$10 million average slate budget**, **$8 million** is delivered directly from the Commonwealth to the film, comprising:

- $4 million Producer Offset
- $2 million Screen Australia direct investment
- $2 million Slate Bonus

These funds are paid directly to the production, minimising intermediary structures where possible so public support is spent on making the film and connecting it to audiences—not on financial engineering, gap premiums, and avoidable financing leakage.

This matters. Every federal dollar should go **on screen or toward the audience**, not to someone clipping the ticket.

The public return is therefore:

- cleaner
- more transparent
- more efficient
- more accountable

The slate is modelled on an **average** budget of $10 million per film, not a fixed per-title cap. The National Slate Manager is granted discretion to allocate funding flexibly by making some competitive genre and event documentary films well below the $10 million average and redirecting savings into higher-impact broad-access films—improving audience reach and cultural presence without increasing total public expenditure.

Delivery discipline and readiness standards

Participation in the slate is conditional on delivery discipline.

All slate films must reach **picture lock no later than 18 weeks** prior to their allocated release window, with earlier delivery required where international or domestic festival play is part of the strategy.

This standard ensures:

professional trailers, posters, and stills can be produced properly

exhibitors can commit sessions with confidence

premium-format access can be realistically pursued where relevant

national publicity and talent commitments can be scheduled coherently

Films that are not ready do not slide into weaker dates. They exit the slate and funding is reallocated.

This introduces seriousness, not punishment. It treats theatrical release as an event, not an afterthought.

Cadence protection: each monthly window is backed by a rolling shortlist of "release-ready" alternates so the slate remains a reliable national rhythm even when a title fails readiness standards.

Indicative national release calendar

Audience-led, date-protected

The calendar below is indicative rather than rigid, but it establishes national guardrails that prevent cannibalisation and restore theatrical logic. It is built on historic attendance behaviour, school holiday patterns, and proven audience demand.

AUSTRALIAN FILMS - THE SLATE 2027			
JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL
Family / Kids (mid-late holiday window)	**Rom-com**	**Multicultural** (LOTE or First Nations)	**Family / Animation** (Easter S/H)
MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST
Comedy	**Prestige**	**Family / Animation** (Winter school holiday)	**Event Documentary**
SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
YA / Teen	**YA genre / horror**	**Prestige** (Awards-positioned)	**Family / YA** (Summer event)

Why the Slate Works

This structure:

- eliminates Australian-on-Australian cannibalisation
- restores exhibitor confidence
- aligns films with real audiences
- reintroduces theatrical discipline
- makes success measurable
- rebuilds audience habit

Most importantly, it treats Australian films as national cultural moments, not isolated production outcomes.

12.5 Marketing and Audience Development Fund

Rebuilding the missing craft layer

Australian films do not fail theatrically because audiences reject them. They fail because they are routinely released without the professional marketing materials required to signal genre, tone and relevance.

For more than a decade, marketing has been treated as an afterthought. This has hollowed out an entire layer of craft that once sat between filmmaking and exhibition.

Trailers, posters and stills are specialist disciplines. Their collapse is not a taste problem. It is a skills and resourcing problem.

Tiered, predictable marketing support

A standing Marketing and Audience Development Fund supports approximately 75 Australian productions annually, with tiered support scaled to release ambition:

- $20,000, small release uplift
- $40,000, medium release uplift
- $80,000, large release uplift

Funds may be used for professional trailer cutting, poster design, stills photography, EPK creation and audience testing. Marketing assets funded under this program are QAPEable regardless of timing.

Eligibility should be simple. If a project holds a provisional certificate from POCU and has protected its original marketing allocation, it should qualify for support. The purpose is straightforward: to help publicly backed films reach the audience they were funded to serve.

Marketing support is the lowest-cost, highest-impact intervention available

12.6 Festival Stability and the Audience Pipeline

Film festivals remain one of the few mechanisms through which Australian films reliably meet audiences, particularly in markets where year-round cinema access is fragile or uneven. They provide discovery, cultural visibility and audience development at a scale that individual releases often cannot achieve alone.

Yet the festival ecosystem operates in a state of permanent precarity. Funding is episodic, governance unstable and planning horizons short. The result is not failure of ambition, but failure of continuity.

The Reboot does not propose expansion.

It proposes stability.

Stability means:

- multi-year agreements instead of one-off event grants
- touring and regional integration as a core KPI, not a nice-to-have
- deliberate linkage between festival premieres and slate-aligned theatrical rollout

Indicative cost: $4–8 million per annum, depending on phase and number of participating festivals.

12.7 Exhibition Renewal Program

Rebuilding the physical layer of audience access

Australian cinemas are not failing due to mismanagement. They are facing a once-in-a-generation capital cliff created by policy timing and external shocks.

The digital transition under the VPF model locked most cinemas into equipment cycles that have now reached end-of-life. Replacement costs are unavoidable. This coincided with pandemic closures, suppressed studio supply and rising operating costs.

The problem is not inefficiency.

It is capital exhaustion in the public interest.

Program design: shared responsibility with targeted equity

Default support: 50% grant / 50% co-contribution

Escalated support, areas of need: 70% grant / 30% co-contribution

Eligible works include projection, sound, accessibility, energy efficiency and essential remediation. Support is conditional on commitment to Australian films, data reporting and slate participation.

This is investment, not rescue.

12.8 Screen Australia Capability for the Reboot

To realign public investment with audience outcomes, Screen Australia requires dedicated, permanent capability in areas currently under-resourced or treated as peripheral. These roles focus on delivery, access and accountability, ensuring public funding translates into public experience.

Proposed permanent roles

Marketing Education and Compliance

- provide structured marketing education prior to commencement of principal photography, ensuring audience definition, positioning and release intent are established early
- set and enforce minimum marketing-readiness standards for publicly funded projects
- support development of fit-for-purpose marketing materials aligned to realistic release scale
- ensure publicly funded films are exhibition-ready at release
- design and coordinate national audience campaigns, for example seasonal initiatives such as *Our Summer of Cinema*, in partnership with exhibitors and distributors

Exhibition Data and Access

- maintain national exhibition, admissions and screen-availability data
- track cinema access by geography, population growth and SES
- treat audience reach as a core policy metric

Slate Coordination

- coordinate release timing and scale across publicly supported titles
- reduce internal competition and release clustering
- align production volume with realistic exhibition capacity

Exhibition Renewal Manager

- act as primary interface between Screen Australia, exhibitors and state agencies
- embed exhibition considerations early in policy and funding design
- coordinate renewal and access initiatives

Exhibition Grants Coordinator

- administer exhibition-facing funding streams
- support regional, outer-metropolitan and independent venues
- monitor access and participation outcomes

Audience Outcomes and Evaluation Lead

- track admissions, access, persistence and reach for publicly supported titles
- evaluate whether interventions deliver measurable audience outcomes
- report longitudinally to government on effectiveness and system performance
- ensure reform remains evidence-led and durable over time

12.9 Cost and Funding

Fiscal impact and value for money

Funding source: tapered individual Location Offset or PDV rebate support above $80 million per film, reallocating excess subsidy at the top end of the market into national audience access, marketing capability and exhibition infrastructure.

The Reboot Expenditure	
Measure	**Cost**
Direct investment boost	$10 million
Slate films	$24 million
Marketing support fund and industry campaigns	$3.5 million
National Film Festival and Exhibition Renewal Fund	$44 million in Year 1 & 2, reducing to $28 million ongoing
Screen Australia staffing	$1.5 million
Total annual cost	**$83 million in Year 1&2, reducing to $67 million per annum thereafter**
Estimated Saving from limiting foreign films to no more than $80M in direct investments	**(70-$150M pa)**
Average saving to federal budget	**$3M-$83M pa**

This reform does not ask for more money for production. It asks for a better alignment between public subsidy and public purpose. At present, Australia provides its most generous support to the most commercially powerful productions, while the cinemas, audience pathways and exhibition conditions that give Australian screen culture its public life remain weakly funded or outside the system altogether. A modest rebalancing at the top end corrects that imbalance. It does not diminish Australia's capacity to attract major international production. It simply recognises that public money must carry public good with it.

That principle is not new. It belongs to the same Australian policy tradition with which this report began. Justice Higgins understood that where markets alone do not produce the conditions a society values, public policy may properly intervene to shape them. The same logic applies here. If Australian taxpayers subsidise screen activity at scale, then the return cannot be measured only in production volume, inward investment or private recoupment. It must also be measured in whether Australians can encounter stories in cinemas, in their own communities, and in the shared civic spaces where culture becomes public life.

The result is stronger cultural return, improved audience outcomes, a more resilient exhibition sector and better value for taxpayers.

Conclusion

The Reboot does not ask for more money for production. It asks for responsibility.

Responsibility for audiences.

Responsibility for access.

Responsibility for outcomes.

Australia did not lose its audience. It lost the system that connected stories to people.

The task now is not simply to make Australian films, but to rebuild the conditions in which Australians can actually see them.

End Credits

If we get this right, the lights will dim not in decline but in anticipation. Strangers will sit side by side. The screen will glow. Laughter, silence, and recognition will ripple through the room. And for a few shared hours, Australians will fall a little in love again—with each other, with the stories we tell, and with the simple act of gathering at the campfire.

Not because we were told to.

But because it feels true, and we show up.

Nick Hayes

Sydney April 2026

"That'll do pig, that'll do."

— Babe

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My thanks to Simon Burton at Numero, and to Ari and Paula from the Numero Australia team.

My thanks also to Prudence and the Microdata Services team at the ABS, true outliers.

My deep gratitude to my friends and family for their support, patience and forgiveness through the making of this report: the missed events, the late arrivals, and the laptop that came on holidays and found its way into far too many social occasions.

I began this work partly as a way of being useful while looking for my next career adventure, and partly in the hope of contributing something of value to an industry that gets into your bones. I love it. And while it will never love me back in the way Victor does, it has sustained me and buttressed me with the most amazing friends and colleagues. A

heartfelt shout-out to Jane Nice, Marina Vidakovic and Lisa Kitching, you encouraged me regularly and, at my lowest points, reminded me to keep my chin up and be seen.

I was lucky enough to tour every state and territory promoting *The Last Cab to Darwin*. I am not, nor do I wish to be, a filmmaker. What I love is the facilitation of creativity. On that tour I saw first-hand the power of film, and of a well-told story, to hold a local audience, to raise us up in hope, to laugh in the face of adversity, to still an auditorium in shared grief, and to show how love can make other boundaries fall away.

Australians are crying out for well-made Australian film, and if this report can help move the policy needle back, even a little, towards the Australian audience in a real way, and not just as a buzzword in a corporate plan or press release, I will have done what I can, with what I have. And that, dear reader, should keep General Patton happy.

About the Author

Nick Hayes is an Australian film and cinema industry executive with more than 25 years' experience across exhibition, distribution, acquisitions, audience development and screen policy. He was recently appointed Chief Executive Officer of Independent Cinemas Australia. His career spans senior leadership roles at Dendy Cinemas, Icon Film Distribution and Umbrella Entertainment, as well as earlier experience at Hoyts and the Sydney Film Festival. He has overseen national cinema operations, capital works and programming, managed theatrical release strategies across more than 100 titles, and worked directly with distributors, exhibitors, filmmakers and government agencies on audience engagement and market access.

Nick is currently on the Board of the Media Resource Centre and Mercury Cinema in Adelaide and has served on the boards of Independent Cinemas Australia, the Australian Independent Distributors Association and the Australian Home Entertainment Distributors Association. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he worked with industry bodies to secure emergency support for independent cinemas nationwide and helped lead national audience recovery initiatives. He received the 2018 Mark Sarfaty CEO Award from Independent Cinemas Australia for services to independent cinema, and the 2023 Independent Spirit Award from the Australian Independent Distributors Association for lifetime achievement.

References, Data Sources and Methodology Note

This report synthesises original analysis with publicly available datasets, industry reporting and comparative international policy research. It is designed to assess what Australians are actually seeing in Australian cinemas, rather than production intent, funding categorisation or project activation alone.

Its central method is release-based and audience-observed. The report is concerned not simply with how many films were funded or completed, but with what happened once those films entered public life through theatrical release.

The primary empirical foundation of *Made, Not Seen* consists of original analysis undertaken by the author using theatrical, demographic, geographic, classification and access datasets. These materials have not previously been assembled or interpreted in this form.

Primary sources include theatrical box office and admissions reporting from Numero Australia, including title-level gross box office data, admissions where reported, 2021–2025 aggregated circuit-level and venue-level reporting, the Australian film gross box office series from 1990 to 2025, and cinema reporting and location records from 2017 to 2025. These materials underpin the report's longitudinal performance analysis, admissions-per-film comparisons, market share analysis by origin, genre and language, release-scale and decay analysis, and venue and circuit performance assessment.

Demographic, socio-economic and cultural participation analysis draws on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, including Census 2021 population data, SA2, SA3 and SA4 geography, SEIFA socio-economic indices, Language Spoken at Home data, and cultural attendance reporting. These materials are used for population-adjusted admissions analysis, cultural alignment analysis, socio-economic gradients in cinema access, growth corridor identification, and broader civic and cultural participation context.

Cinema access and screen supply analysis also relies on an author-compiled national cinema location and screen mapping dataset, drawing on cinema address records, public verification, screen counts, postcode data and ABS geographic overlays. This dataset is used for cinema access mapping, screen density analysis, identification of fragile, under-screened and zero-access regions, venue-scale performance analysis, and national cinema footprint modelling.

Classification analysis draws on the Australian Government Classification Branch's National Classification Database. These records are used to compare market-wide and Australian film classification profiles, assess the supply balance across G, PG, M and MA15+ categories, and examine the audience-access implications of classification patterns.

Release-scale and programming analysis draws on observed circuit programming records, distributor booking patterns, release footprints and screen and session allocation patterns. These materials are used to identify release-size typologies, analyse session density, and assess evidence of structural access suppression, theatrical persistence and run-length patterns.

Comparative land-use analysis involving poker machine provision and loss data draws on NSW Liquor & Gaming reporting. These data are used cautiously and contextually to assess the relationship between civic cultural infrastructure and extractive entertainment uses in selected local government areas.

The report also draws on the author's professional records and long-run market observation from 1999 to 2025, including historical release strategies, exhibition programming practices, capital works and screen deployment, audience behaviour observations, and operational knowledge of theatrical circulation. These records are used for contextual interpretation, triangulation and validation of observed structural change. They are not relied upon as the sole evidentiary basis for headline empirical findings.

Secondary sources are used for context, comparison and policy framing rather than as the primary evidentiary basis for findings. These include Screen Australia annual reports, *The Drama Report*, theatre and screen tracking material, and *94 Films*; Australian Film Commission publications, especially *Get the Picture*; state and local planning instruments, including NSW planning controls, City of Sydney cultural space provisions, transport-led renewal frameworks, and related local and state planning documents; and international comparative material from the British Film Institute, the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the European Audiovisual Observatory, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, CNC France, Telefilm Canada, the New Zealand Film Commission, the Toronto International Film Festival, the OECD, the Austrian Film Institute and FISA+.

The Sydney Metro station-catchment case study draws on ABS SA2 data, NSW Transport station precinct material, Sydney Metro Environmental Impact Statements for

Chatswood to Sydenham and Sydenham to Bankstown, and author-defined walkable catchments. This method is used to reduce CBD dilution and broader boundary distortion, and to assess cinema access at a neighbourhood scale rather than through broad administrative averages.

The report also draws cautiously on public oversight and integrity material relevant to Canterbury-Bankstown Council, including NSW ICAC material such as Operation Dasha and Operation Mantis, the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on State Development report *Allegations of Impropriety Against Agents of the City of Canterbury Bankstown Council* (Report No. 49, February 2023), the NSW Government response to that report, council-commissioned independent review material released publicly, Voluntary Planning Agreement policy and related probity settings, NSW Ombudsman reporting, and NSW Audit Office local government reporting. These materials are used as context for planning governance and public accountability, not as the sole explanatory basis for planning outcomes identified in the report. Go Doggies!

For the purposes of this report, Australian films refer to theatrically released Australian feature films and documentaries as defined within the report dataset. Active cinema refers to a venue operating as a commercially functioning exhibition site during the period analysed. Fragile cinema refers to a venue exhibiting indicators of structural risk, including low scale, weak revenue base or elevated closure vulnerability. Zero-access region refers to a geographic area identified as lacking commercially viable cinema access under the criteria used in the report. Extractive entertainment refers to venue types whose operating model centres on enclosed revenue extraction with limited civic spillover, used here principally in relation to poker machine venues. Walkable access refers to cinema access assessed within defined station-precinct or catchment logic rather than broad LGA or SA3 averages.

This report relies on the best available combination of public, commercial and author-compiled data, but several limitations remain. Admissions data is not available uniformly across all titles and years. Cinema location and screen mapping required reconciliation across multiple sources. Some catchment and access assessments involve author-defined analytical boundaries. Gaming figures are used indicatively at planning scale, not as a forensic audit of venue-by-venue activity. Where official reporting is absent, incomplete or methodologically incompatible with audience-based analysis, that limitation is identified directly rather than inferred away.

Long-run gross box office comparisons are adjusted for inflation and population change where appropriate. Comparative findings are based on the best available reconciled data and should be read in light of known limitations in historical reporting environments.

This report benefited from the use of digital drafting and editorial support tools during its preparation. Responsibility for the argument, analysis, conclusions and any remaining errors rests solely with the author.

This report does not argue for reduced production volume as an end in itself. It argues for clearer accountability for audience access, market readiness, exhibition conditions and cultural reach. Its central concern is not whether Australian films are being made, but whether Australians are being given a meaningful opportunity to see them.

Appendix Note: Audience as the Feedback Loop

Audience participation is the only real-time, system-wide feedback mechanism in the screen ecosystem. Everything else is delayed, partial or self-referential.

Audience response simultaneously tests creative alignment, marketing clarity, release strategy, access and exhibition, and cultural relevance. No other metric integrates all of these functions at once.

When audience outcomes are not measured, reported or valued, production becomes self-referential, assessment culture optimises for approval rather than connection, marketing becomes perfunctory, release timing becomes arbitrary, exhibition becomes invisible, and failure is misdiagnosed as taste or market change. The system loses its ability to self-correct.

Production metrics answer one question: did the system successfully make a film?

Audience metrics answer the harder and more important question: did the film successfully enter public life?

Cinema provides the clearest feedback signal in the screen ecosystem because it requires active choice, physical presence, time-bound commitment and shared participation. A cinema ticket represents a deliberate act in a way a stream or algorithmic recommendation does not. That makes theatrical attendance the clearest early indicator of whether a film is culturally aligned, market-ready and meaningfully accessible.

By treating audience as a downstream by-product rather than a core diagnostic tool, Australian screen policy weakened the feedback loop that once kept production, distribution and exhibition in balance.

The result is not simply creative failure.

It is systemic deafness.

SA3s With no Commercial Cinemas - Population Base Over 40 Thousand

SA3 Name	State	SA3 Population	Commercial Screens
Wanneroo	Western Australia	208,506	0
Merrylands - Guildford	NSW	163,816	0
Kogarah - Rockdale	NSW	145,918	0
Bringelly - Green Valley	NSW	143,080	0
Blacktown - North	NSW	142,771	0
Canterbury	NSW	141,091	0
Casey - North	Victoria	137,287	0
Wollongong	NSW	134,762	0
Gosnells	Western Australia	126,376	0
Cardinia	Victoria	118,342	0
Cockburn	Western Australia	115,824	0
Sutherland - Menai - Heathcote	NSW	111,740	0
Whitehorse - West	Victoria	107,187	0
Lower Hunter	NSW	97,927	0
Browns Plains	Queensland	93,622	0
Surf Coast - Bellarine Peninsula	Victoria	93,417	0
The Hills District	Queensland	89,786	0
North Lakes	Queensland	88,063	0
Gungahlin	ACT	87,682	0
Lake Macquarie - West	NSW	85,022	0
Moreland - North	Victoria	80,537	0
Springwood - Kingston	Queensland	79,066	0
Forest Lake - Oxley	Queensland	78,711	0
Port Adelaide - East	South Australia	76,855	0
Carlingford	NSW	74,024	0
Narangba - Burpengary	Queensland	69,207	0
Shepparton	Victoria	68,206	0
Rocklea - Acacia Ridge	Queensland	67,890	0
Ipswich Hinterland	Queensland	67,292	0
Nillumbik - Kinglake	Victoria	67,105	0
West Torrens	South Australia	65,057	0
Queanbeyan	NSW	64,793	0
Jimboomba	Queensland	61,638	0
Sandgate	Queensland	61,171	0
Sunshine Coast Hinterland	Queensland	59,039	0
Buderim	Queensland	58,956	0
Botany	NSW	58,771	0
Kalamunda	Western Australia	58,762	0
Hobart - North West	Tasmania	58,008	0

Cairns - North	Queensland	57,774	0
St Marys	NSW	56,790	0
Wheat Belt - North	Western Australia	55,937	0
Campbelltown (SA)	South Australia	55,173	0
Pennant Hills - Epping	NSW	54,832	0
Marrickville - Sydenham - Petersham	NSW	54,771	0
The Gap - Enoggera	Queensland	54,179	0
Lithgow - Mudgee	NSW	47,870	0
Kenmore - Brookfield - Moggill	Queensland	47,733	0
Maryborough	Queensland	47,629	0
Beenleigh	Queensland	46,316	0
Kwinana	Western Australia	45,867	0
Wollondilly	NSW	45,837	0
Surfers Paradise	Queensland	45,197	0
Mundaring	Western Australia	43,792	0
Manly	NSW	43,173	0
Nundah	Queensland	42,971	0
Darling Downs - East	Queensland	42,862	0
Stonnington - East	Victoria	42,162	0
Charters Towers - Ayr - Ingham	Queensland	41,467	0