

FUTURE

Blackburn with Darwen
Screen Strategy

2026—2035

OFFFILM

HOW BLACKBURN WITH
DARWEN BECOMES THE FILM
CAPITAL OF LANCASHIRE

UNRIVALLED HERITAGE REGENERATED AND AFFORDABLE TECHNICAL INNOVATION CENTRAL LOCATION

Once, Blackburn with Darwen was at the heart of the industrial revolution. Today, it is ready for its next reinvention.

Future of Film: The Blackburn with Darwen Screen Strategy 2026-2035 is an ambitious ten-year plan to transform heritage into cinematic opportunity. By using the borough's unique assets, we aim to address key challenges in the screen industries—such as skills shortages, infrastructure gaps, and the need for continuous technological innovation—to unlock sustainable growth.

Our vision is clear: by 2035, Blackburn with Darwen will be a world-class film destination—the Film Capital of Lancashire—with a vibrant, future-facing production hub shaping the future of film and the screen industries. With a target investment of £18 million over the first five years, we aim to create a film-friendly Borough that drives producer and production growth alongside skilled workforce development.

Blackburn were pioneers at the dawn of cinema. Mitchell and Kenyon were filming here before the Lumière Brothers got started. Kitchen sink dramas in the 1960's used the dramatic and dynamic landscape of East Lancashire to tell a story about a changing Britain. Now, as Britain changes once again, we want to reclaim our place at the heart of the screen industries, future-proofing Blackburn with Darwen's growth and place in the 21st century.

Our mission is to transform Blackburn with Darwen into a self-sustaining production ecosystem that supports local creativity, encourages inward investment, and nurtures future filmmakers. At its heart is a belief that places its industrial past—specifically its highly desirable mill heritage—central to becoming a powerhouse of cultural innovation.

Blackburn with Darwen not only has a rich film heritage but a young and diverse population, combined with affordability and a variety of in-demand, scenic filming locations. The Borough is perfectly placed to take the opportunity to become a hub for content creation, production, and skills development.

In this broadsheet handout, we explain an overview of what our strategy is and why it matters.

WE



TAKE THEM AND MAKE THEM

An aerial photograph of a town, likely Blackburn, showing a mix of residential houses, a large industrial building with a corrugated metal roof, and a hill in the background with a lighthouse on top. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The text is overlaid in a large, bold, white font.

THE INDUSTRIAL,
THE URBAN AND
THE GORGEOUS,
ROLLING COUNTRYSIDE

OUR EXISTING STRENGTHS

There's a lot we will need to do. But what about the resources we already have? What are our existing strengths? Blackburn with Darwen has a versatile blend of the industrial, the urban and the gorgeous, rolling countryside of East Lancashire. In fact, there are few regions that have such desirable settings all within such a small radius. There is our workforce, which is not only younger — 25% of our residents are under 25 — but more diverse than the national average, and this diversity equips us well to understand and shape the stories of the future.

Blackburn with Darwen is affordable, with commercial rent at just 25% the cost of London (not to mention some of our other regional competitors). And we have a supportive environment. This means a strong, punchy commitment from Blackburn with Darwen council, as well as rich cross sector collaboration.

EAST LANCASHIRE ON SCREEN

From the flickering shadows of Edwardian shop fronts, to the industrial grit and realism of modern social dramas, East Lancashire looks good on screen. Blackburn with Darwen was among the first places in Great Britain to begin a love affair with the moving image, and this continues to thrive well into the 2020s. From mill workers to monarchs, this is the story of Blackburn with Darwen's screen heritage.

In 1896, cinema made its East Lancashire debut at Blackburn's Lyceum Theatre, with a modest 'theatregraph' showing a man watering his garden. Just a year later, local pioneers Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon transformed this novelty into an industry, founding Norden and developing their own cinematograph and becoming some of the first film producers in the UK, whose legacy only became fully understood in the 21st Century.

Mitchell and Kenyon, who shot everything from the mundane to the monumental, were innovative as well as entrepreneurial and business-minded. The single best documents of Edwardian Britain come from them standing with their camera at factory gates, riding the tram at the Edwardian seaside showing dynamic overviews of fast-changing working life that are almost unbearably poignant today.

They made Westerns - in fact, the first Western can be credited to *Kidnapped By Indians* in 1899, using local Blackburn actors to capture an early heist movie. They made comedies - predicting the Charlie Chaplin silent comedies of the future with their pioneering *Diving Lucy*.

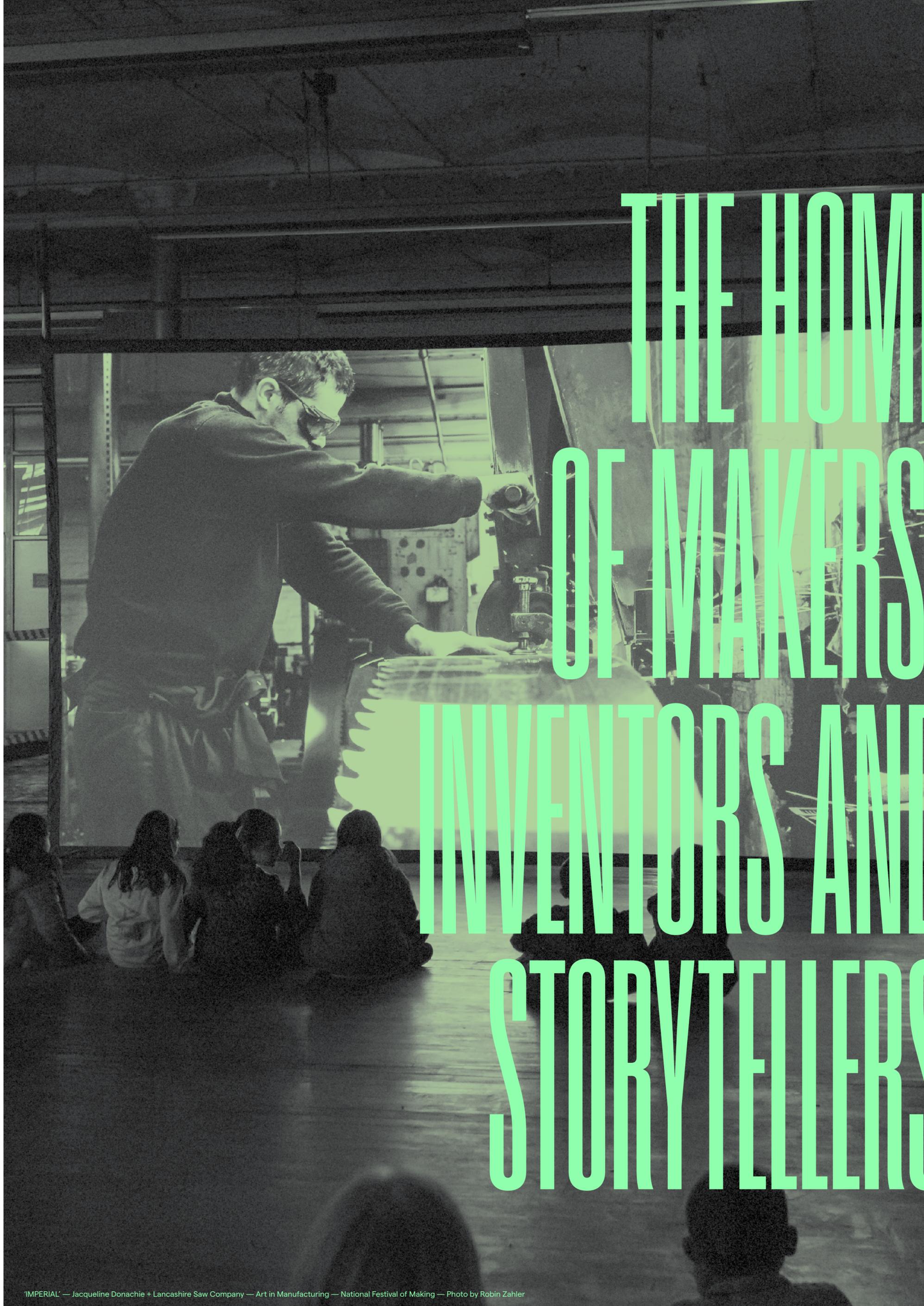
Their legacy was obvious with Blackburn becoming an early adopter of cinema. They were the original early adopters: Blackburn enjoyed Britain's first purpose-built cinema in 1906, the Alexandra Hall at Eanem Bridge. In these years, Blackburn was both setting and subject.

The Mitchell and Kenyon era passed, but their entrepreneurial spirit lived on through Feature Films Ltd and Northern Film Productions in the 1910s—the latter housed in an old mill that had itself been filmed previously by Mitchell and Kenyon. They made educational shorts (*Our Service to Your Children*), scenic travelogues (*Glorious Ribblesdale*), and even screened films at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

In post-war Britain, Blackburn with Darwen was the backdrop of choice for films that entertained as well as interrogated the new Britain. Burnley appeared in legendary film studio Ealing's *The Man In The White Suit*, whilst *Whistle Down The Wind* cast local children from Clitheroe and Burnley. Director Bryan Forbes understood that the contrast between the urban industrial landscape and the countryside, also part of the region, was a unique palette for his now classic film. John Schlesinger, director of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Billy Liar*, shot in various places around East Lancashire - including Mullard and Infirmary hospital in Blackburn - when making the key kitchen sink drama 1962's *A Kind Of Loving*.

But it wasn't all whimsy. The 1970s brought confrontational documentary. Ken Loach's *The Save the Children Fund Film*, showing poverty and deprivation in Blackburn, was shelved for four decades. Nick Broomfield's *Juvenile Liaison*, later that decade, was deemed so explosive it was suppressed by local police, and known as "the film the police arrested" before its eventual 1990 screening.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen East Lancashire recast in new lights. Victoria Wood's *Pat and Margaret*, gritty youth dramas like *Love + Hate*, and Aaron Dunleavy's improvisational *Throw Me to the Dogs* showcase Blackburn's diversity and resilience in a changing Britain. Burnley, too, has stayed camera-ready, featuring in *The King's Speech*, *The Bank of Dave* and its 2024 sequel.



THE HOME OF MAKERS, INVENTORS AND STORYTELLERS

Blackburn has always been the home of makers, inventors and storytellers. We have a roadmap to transform the Borough into a thriving centre for film and television production.

Our three core outcomes are:

TO CREATE A FILM FRIENDLY BOROUGH,

This means establishing a resource-rich, supportive environment to attract and retain filmmakers, ensuring seamless, efficient production processes. This will drive industry growth and encourage new business start-ups in Blackburn with Darwen.

TO DRIVE PRODUCER AND PRODUCTION GROWTH,

Which is to develop the infrastructure and business support services necessary to attract and nurture productions, support industry growth, and develop film start-ups. This will draw inward investment while helping grow our local talent base.

AND SKILLED WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT.

Which is to cultivate and equip the next generation of technicians, producers and screen professionals to meet the evolving demands of the film and screen industries. This will ensure a workforce with the right mix of technical and creative skills to thrive in a rapidly changing sector.

Our mission is to build a dynamic production hub for film and television by creating a film-friendly Borough, driving producer and production growth, and developing a skilled workforce.

The hub will be developed in three phases through six interconnected initiatives supporting all stages of production—from talent development and business incubation to content creation and cultural engagement.

Imperial Mill, Lancashire's first state-of-the-art production house, will be the hub's core, bringing all elements together under one roof and providing world-class facilities.

Partnerships are central to our plan, including a film-friendly charter to promote collaboration and a screen industry partnership to drive success. A five-year, £18 million investment (ex.capital costs for production hub) is needed to support services, production support, and sector development programmes.

The three phases are:

PHASE ONE

(2026–2027)

Pilot projects and programmes

PHASE TWO

(2028–2030)

Build and launch Imperial Mill and infrastructure

PHASE THREE

(2031–2035)

Expand the industry ecosystem

THE BIG SIX INITIATIVES

Our strategy is built around a six-point delivery model - a production hub developed through six big initiatives—designed to guide us from our current position to establishing Blackburn with Darwen the Film Capital of Lancashire.

1 Film Office

A Film Office will raise the area's profile nationally and internationally, offering production services that increase regional expenditure and content creation. This will attract investment from production companies and service providers, driving business growth.

5 year budget:	Launch:
£3.5m	2026

2 Film Festival

A Future of Film Festival including an internationally recognised film market, will enhance the area's global and cultural profile as a film destination, contributing to the visitor economy.

5 year budget:	Launch:
£2.7m	2027

3 Film Fund

A Film Fund will increase the number, quality, and diversity of film and screen productions made in Blackburn with Darwen. By supporting both independent and major projects, it will back local stories and invest in a range of content creation, development and production.

5 year budget:	Launch:
£5m	2028

4 Training Facility

A screen industries skills programme will provide training, retraining, and education to develop a skilled and local workforce. A screen industries innovation and training hub will support the creation of a screen institution within Blackburn's Digital and Cyber Skills Campus.

5 year budget:	Launch:
£4.8m	2029

5 Business Incubator

A business incubation, development and support service will assist startups and foster company growth, building a strong and sustainable supplier base.

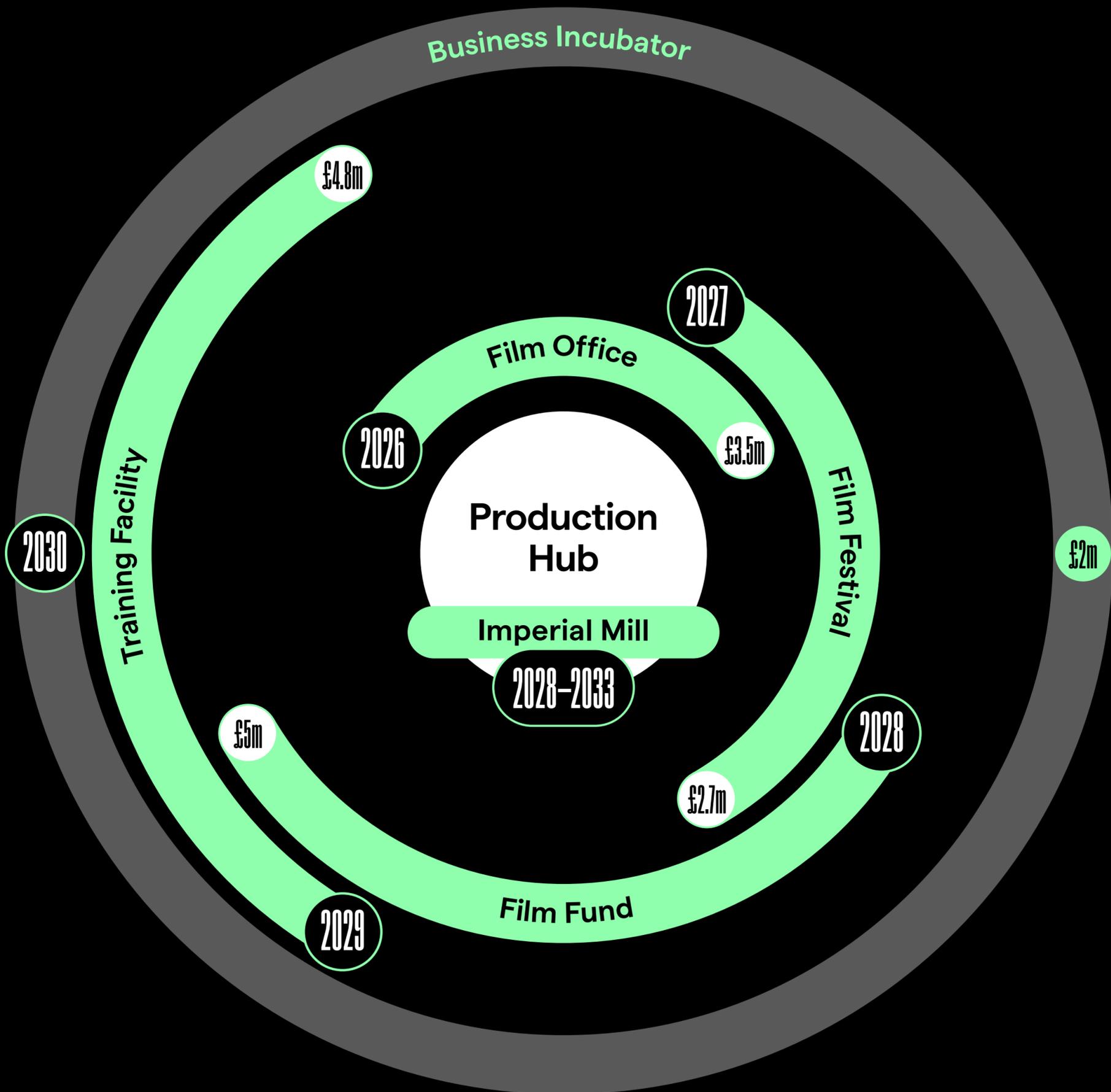
5 year budget:	Launch:
£2m	2030

6 Production Hub

Imperial Mill, Lancashire's first dedicated production house for film and the screen industries, will serve as the cornerstone of delivery. Offering the high-spec facilities essential for modern screen production, the Production Hub at Imperial Mill* will strengthen Blackburn with Darwen's reputation in the industry.

5 year budget:	Launch:
£TBC	2028— 2033

*Imperial Mill production house - pending feasibility study; confirmation TBC.



THE BIGGER PICTURE

For some, a film industry in Blackburn with Darwen might sound an unusual thing. Isn't film made in Hollywood? But for the last two decades, global film production has undergone seismic shifts in how it operates. And the Blackburn with Darwen Screen Strategy is a measured and timely response to these shifts.

It is not just the gritty British thriller or romantic period drama that has been made in Britain, but, most often the blockbuster or the superhero feature. In 2014, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was shot by Disney at Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire, and Hollywood has kept growing closer to the UK since. The biggest global film of 2024 was *Wicked*, the biggest global film of 2023 was *Barbie*. What do these two films have in common? They were both made in the UK.

Last year alone — according to British Film Institute research — 65% of UK production spend came from the 'Big Five' major US film studios (Disney, Paramount, Sony Pictures, Universal Pictures, and Warner Bros) and three US streaming giants (Netflix, Apple and Amazon). This amounted to £1.37bn of inward investment, a near 50% jump on 2023.

Why? Firstly, it is cheaper to make films in the UK. That is not set to change. Generous tax incentives such as the Film Tax Relief, which offers a 25% tax rebate, as well as lower labour costs and centralised national funding for film have made the UK a global leader in film production. To use an example, Universal's blockbuster *Jurassic World: Dominion* delivered a reported £89.1m savings by going British.

Our government understands this, and has taken steps to create a climate of investment and stability for film and the screen industries across the UK.

"Despite the huge challenges faced by the sector in recent years, film and TV in the UK have continued to generate a huge amount of revenue and jobs right across the country," said Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy at the end of 2024, emphasising how the Government was **"putting film and the creative industries at the heart of our growth plans."**

Using research from the BFI, here is a breakdown of film and TV produced in the UK in 2024. It is not hard to see how Blackburn with Darwen can and will position itself to generate substantial revenue by becoming a hub with easy access to North West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions, and beyond.

Film and high-end television production generates local business activity and jobs across the UK. In 2024 alone, the following were produced in locations to which Blackburn with Darwen has ready access.

North West: film — *Greenland: Migration, Bank of Dave 2: the Loan Ranger, Fackham Hall, CC: Emily*; **HETV** — *Disability Benefits, Fountain of Youth, Missing You, This City is Ours, House of Guinness, The Talamasca*.

Yorkshire and the Humber: film — *Giant, 28 Years Later, The Choral, Falling, Maintenance Required*; **HETV** — *All Creatures Great and Small (Series 5), Riot Women, Virdee, Reunion, Adolescence*.

This is not even taking into account UK wide production on *How to Train Your Dragon, H is for Hawk, Madfabulous, Mr Burton, Gavin & Stacey: The Finale, Mudtown, The War Between the Land and the Sea, Under Salt Marsh, The Change, Young Sherlock, Downton Abbey 3, Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy, the Peaky Blinders movie, Marching Powder, Slow Horses, The Magic Faraway Tree, Ludwig*, and more.

R&D PROGRAMME

Pre-Strategy Development
and Implementation
2025—2026

-  Activity
-  Outcome
-  KPI

2025

EVENT

-  — Business Breakfast Event
- Strategy Publication
- Creative Content
-  **Connection**
-  — 25+ Stakeholders
- 5–10 Ambassadors
- 300+ Online Impressions

AUDIT

-  — Film Infrastructure
- Screen Skills and Training
- Findings Forum
- Process & Evaluation Framework
-  **Data and Intelligence**
-  — 100+ Industry Assets
- 3–5 Key Skills Gaps
- Directory Content
- 30+ Forum Attendees

ECOSYSTEM

-  — **Industry:** Production Hub Delivery Plan
- **Culture:** Film Festival Delivery Plan
- **Education:** Training Facility Delivery Plan
- Imperial Mill Capital Development Plan
-  **Business Plan**
-  — Film Office Model and Charter
- Festival Model and Partnership
- Training Facility Model and Partnership
- £500k+ Capital Pipeline

2026

PLATFORM

-  — Website Development
- Identity & Brand Strategy
- Investor Relations Campaign
- Industry Directory Production
-  **Brand Development**
-  — Website Live
- Brand Toolkit
- 1st Film Office Directory
- 1,000+ Platform Visits

LAUNCH

-  — Host 100 Industry Guests
- Celebrate Achievements
- Announce 3–5 Initiatives
-  **Visibility**
-  — £3–5 million Secured
- 100+ Attendees
- 3+ Strategic Partnerships

FUTURE OF FILM

For more information contact policyforum@uclan.ac.uk

The Blackburn with Darwen Screen Strategy
— outlining our six-initiative Production Hub
model — will be launched online in July 2025

discoverbwd.com/screenstrategy



in partnership with

