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# **PUBLIC OPINION AND THE BBFC GUIDELINES 2005**

## **INTRODUCTION – PUBLIC OPINION AND THE BBFC GUIDELINES 2005**

The BBFC makes much of its claim that the Guidelines, used to classify all films, videos, DVDs, trailers, cinema and video advertisements and some video games, reflect public opinion. When the BBFC published Guidelines in September 2000 the research underpinning them was one of the most extensive research exercises into public attitudes carried out by any media regulator. To ensure that we stay in line with public opinion the Board carried out an even more extensive consultation exercise in 2004 resulting in a new set of Guidelines, published in February 2005. Over 11,000 people (7,000 more than in 1999/2000) across the UK gave their views on whether the Guidelines still accurately reflected what they expect from content at the different category ratings. Demographically and geographically balanced qualitative and quantitative opinion polling has resulted in Guidelines which have been fine-tuned but not radically amended. They continue to pay particular attention to the protection of children and other vulnerable groups.

Some might suggest that this means that the whole exercise was a waste of time. On the contrary, it enables the Board to re-affirm its public accountability in the thoroughly researched knowledge that over the past four years public opinion has become neither markedly more censorious nor more liberal. The Board's contract with the public, in the shape of the published Guidelines, ensures that people going to the cinema or renting or buying a DVD can be confident about what to expect from the work, based on the category and the Consumer Advice.

It is impossible to reach a classification decision which will be agreed upon by the whole population. We will always have instances of works which offend some sections of the population just as we sometimes outrage libertarian views when we intervene to cut, or even refuse a certificate to a work. What the research shows, summarised in this report, is that for the majority of the public we get it right for the majority of the time.

This report has been written for the BBFC by Dr Robert Towler, who also provided expert advice and support throughout the research project. It provides an overview of the research and a discussion of the findings.

David Cooke  
Director  
February 2005

## Methodology

The research summarised here, which explored the views of more than 11,000 adults in the UK, comprised four elements.

- Main survey
- QUEST survey
- Website survey
- Focus groups

### *Main survey (Hall tests)*

The design of the main survey replicated the design employed for similar research conducted in 2000. The research was undertaken by TNS Media, a major research company which had taken over System 3, the company which had conducted the 2000 survey. A sample of 1,200 adults aged 18+ was recruited using quotas for sex, age, class and working status, in April 2004. Respondents were recruited at 24 locations, two in Wales, three in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland, and remainder spread throughout England. People who had been recruited attended a local hall, used as an interview centre, where they were given the BBFC's Classification Guidelines and a self-completion questionnaire which they completed in the centre; completion took approximately 25 minutes. The achieved sample was 1,239.

### *QUEST survey*

The same materials were distributed by post to the 4,000 adult members of a panel of television viewers maintained by Ipsos-RSL, and were returned to the research company by post. This work, too, was undertaken in April 2004.

### *Website survey*

From December 2003 until March 2004, the BBFC website invited those who visited it to complete an on-line version of the same questionnaire used in the main survey. In addition, other people, including people active in the film industry, were invited to complete the on-line questionnaire, and were directed to the website. The website questionnaire was hosted on the website of TNS Media, to which there was a link from the BBFC site, and completed questionnaires were analysed by TNS Media. Over the three month period 5,738 copies of the on-line questionnaires were completed.

### *Focus groups*

Qualitative research, in the form of twenty-eight two-hour focus groups, was conducted by Goldstone Perl. Seven groups discussed the issues surrounding the 12/12A classifications; seven considered drugs classification; seven dealt with the ways language affected classification; and a final seven looked at violence and its impact on the ratings given to films.

To make for clear presentation, this report concentrates on the findings of the main survey, with comparisons with the benchmark findings of the exactly similar survey conducted in 2000, and with reference to findings from the on-line survey where they throw additional or instructive light on attitudes. Almost without exception, however, the findings from the three 2004 surveys followed a stable pattern. Respondents in the hall tests employed for the main survey were the most cautious, or 'conservative', in their replies. Very consistently, the replies given by members of the large panel which made up the sample for the QUEST survey were somewhat less conservative, and this stable difference is readily understood. The main survey sample was recruited expressly for this research; questionnaires were administered in halls, where respondents had ample opportunity to sit quietly with time to read though the BBFC Classification Guidelines; respondents then had both the time and

a congenial environment in which to complete their questionnaires. Hence, almost optimum conditions obtained for data collection for the main sample.

The QUEST sample had the advantage of its very large size, but panel members were accustomed to completing questionnaires once a month, if not weekly, where the subjects covered routinely included media topics. Furthermore, less careful attention will probably have been given to studying the Classification Guidelines, given that the task was completed by respondents in their own homes, and at their leisure. Given these factors, the QUEST respondents might be expected to have been somewhat less cautious in their replies.

Respondents who completed the questionnaire on-line represented a significantly different constituency. Although large, the sample was self-recruited, i.e. online respondents chose to complete a questionnaire about film and video/DVD classification, and therefore the sample may be taken as representative, not of the general public – as with the main survey and the QUEST survey – but of people with a special interest in film and film classification. It was wholly predictable, therefore, that their views should have been much more ‘liberal’ across the range of topics covered by the questionnaire.

The consistent differences between responses obtained from the three samples can be illustrated by replies to two questions, chosen at random:

<b>Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statement: “The Guidelines allow too much sex or references to sex at ‘U’ and ‘PG’”.</b>			
	Main survey	QUEST survey	Online survey
	%	%	%
Strongly agree	15	10	3
Agree	26	24	7
Neutral	32	28	28
Disagree	21	30	40
Strongly disagree	3	3	22
No reply	*	5	*

<b>At present, would you say that the violence standards outlined in the Guidelines are:</b>			
	Main survey	QUEST survey	Online survey
	%	%	%
Too strict	4	3	34
About right	53	55	53
Not strict enough	41	35	13
No reply	3	8	*

As a further observation about the main survey, it should be said the responses gave all the appearances of being reliable. Thus, for example, at more than one point in the questionnaire respondents were given a list of statements, and invited to indicate, for each, the extent of their agreement or disagreement. The lists were mixed, in the sense that agreement with some statements implied a ‘liberal’ view, while the same ‘liberal’ view in respect of other statement required disagreement. Lazy, or inattentive, respondents will tend to tick the same response for each statement in a list, but there was no evidence of such patterns in responses to the main survey, giving considerable confidence in the reliability of the research.

The report draws also on the findings of the qualitative research. The results from each group of seven extended focus groups was the subject of a two-hour presentation to the BBFC by the researchers, and unfortunately this report can provide no more than the structure of findings from the research, together with a

small number of illustrative quotations from the participants. These elements are integrated into the report so that quantitative and qualitative findings inform each other, but it should be borne in mind that the focus groups were a rich source of insights, and one to which this kind of report cannot hope to do justice.

### Viewing habits

A majority (58%) of respondents in the survey said they had bought or rented a video or DVD at least once in the previous month, which was substantially more than the 43% found in the equivalent survey in 2000. The proportion saying they never or almost never bought or rented was only a quarter (24%), whereas it had been 40% in 2000. Men reported more frequent video renting than did women, as did younger people compared with older respondents, and more people with children – especially children aged 6-11 – said they rented videos more frequently than did people with no children at home. Frequent cinema goers, too, were frequent users of videos/DVDs: of those who went to the cinema at least once a week, 53% also bought or rented a video/DVD at least once a week, while of those who went to the cinema at least once a month, 76% bought or rented a video/DVD at least once a month.

How frequently, on average, do you rent or buy videos/DVDs to watch at home?		
	2000 Survey	2004 Survey
	%	%
Every day	1	2
2-3 times a week	6	8
Once a week	10	15
Once a fortnight	12	14
Once a month	14	17
Once every 2-3 months	11	11
Once every 4-6 months	6	8
Less often	16	10
Never	24	14
Not stated	*	*

\* Less than 1

Findings from the on-line survey were in sharp contrast. Among this group, a quarter said they bought or rented at least once a week, and 89% at least once a month.

With 36% of respondents saying they went at least once a month, regular cinema going, too, appeared to be up on 2000 when it was 30%. Again, more men than women claimed frequent attendance, as did younger compared with older people. Surprisingly, perhaps, having children did not reduce cinema going for people claiming to go at least once a month, except for those with children of five and under. Avid users of videos/DVDs were frequent cinema goers: of those who bought or rented a video at least once a week, 53% went to the cinema at least once a week as well.

How frequently, on average, do you go to the cinema?		
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey
	%	%
Every day	*	*
2-3 times a week	1	1
Once a week	4	4
Once a fortnight	7	8
Once a month	18	23
Once every 2-3 months	19	20
Once every 4-6 months	15	12
Less often	23	20
Never	14	12
Not stated	*	*

\* Less than 1

The on-line respondents were very frequent cinema goers. Nearly a fifth (19%) went at least once a week, and a substantial majority (65%) went at least once a month.

### Classification

Respondents were asked a simple question about how often they noticed the classification of a film or video or DVD before deciding to watch it. The figure for those always noticing it, 40%, in 2004 was little different from that found in the 2000 survey. Slightly more women than men claimed always to notice the rating, but more people with children said they did, rising to nearly three-quarters (73%) of people with children aged 12-14.

How often do you notice the classification of a video/DVD/film when selecting it to watch?				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Always	43	<b>40</b>	35	54
Sometimes	43	<b>43</b>	42	36
Never	14	<b>17</b>	19	10
Not stated	*	*	4	

\* Less than 1

Among those who completed the questionnaire on the website, a substantially higher proportion (54%) said they always noticed the rating, but having children appeared to have little additional effect, for even among those with children aged 9-11 only 64% said they always noticed the classification.

Questions about how useful people found the classification rating were asked, separately, in respect of films, when watching alone or with other adults, and with younger people under 18, and then in respect of videos/DVDs, again when watching alone or with adults, and with children.

When respondents were asked about deciding to watch films alone or in the company of other adults, 64% said they found the rating useful, 20% said they did not, and 15% said the question did not apply to them – because they seldom or never went to films. The findings are closely similar to those found in 2000. Larger numbers of men than of women, and of older than of younger people, said they found the ratings useful. ('Very' and 'fairly' responses are combined, and the percentages making no response are not shown.)

How useful are the classification ratings when you decide to view a film on you own or with other adults (over 18)?				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Useful	62	<b>64</b>	54	49
Not useful	21	<b>20</b>	18	37
Not applicable	16	<b>15</b>	23	15

Fewer respondents to the website questionnaire said they found the ratings useful, and more said they did not.

Asked the same question in respect of videos and DVDs, slightly fewer people (60%) than for films said they found the rating useful, and this was marginally more than gave the same answer in 2000. Again, more women than men said they found the classification ratings useful (65% vs 55%), but in this case there was no consistent relationship with the age of respondents.

<b>How useful are the classification ratings when you decide to view a video/DVD on your own or with other adults (over 18)?</b>				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Useful	56	<b>60</b>	55	47
Not useful	20	<b>22</b>	21	39
Not applicable	19	<b>15</b>	19	15

Fewer respondents to the questionnaire on-line again said they found the ratings useful in deciding what to watch.

When asked about deciding to see a film in the company of young people, more than three-quarters (76%) of respondents said they found ratings useful, which was roughly in line with what was found in 2000. The responses of men and of women were similar, as were the responses given by people of different ages. Having children, however, affected the responses given. Among those with no children, 73% said they found the ratings useful, whereas among those with children the figure was 85%, and for people with children aged 6-11 it was 93%.

<b>How useful are the classification ratings when you decide to view a film with young people under 18?</b>				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Useful	79	<b>77</b>	62	73
Not useful	3	<b>10</b>	6	16
Not applicable	11	<b>12</b>	26	12

As an exception to the pattern found in most of this research, the findings from the on-line survey questionnaire were closely similar to those from the main survey. While 77% of respondents in the main survey said they found ratings useful in deciding what films to watch with a young person, 73% of the on-line respondents said the same thing. Among the on-line respondents who had children, the proportion was even higher, at 77%, and higher still among those with children under 12 years of age, at 82%. Among the on-line respondents with children aged 12+, however, only 71% said they found the classification rating useful.

The overall responses were almost the same when people were asked about deciding what to view with young people on video or DVD, but there were variations within the data. More women than men said they found ratings useful (78% vs 71%), as did those aged 25-34 (81%), perhaps because they were more likely to have young children. More of the respondents known to have children said they found ratings useful when deciding what to view on video/DVD (84%), and the figures were higher still when the children were young: 90% among those with children aged 6-8, and 88% among those with children aged 9-11.

<b>How useful are the classification ratings when you decide to view a video/DVD with young people under 18?</b>				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Useful	74	<b>74</b>	63	72
Not very useful	8	<b>10</b>	7	18
Not applicable	13	<b>13</b>	23	11

As was found in respect of films, roughly the same proportion of on-line respondents as respondents to the main survey said they found classification ratings useful in deciding what to view on video/DVD with young people under 18, and again the proportions were higher still among people with children, especially with young children.

The next question in the survey asked how frequently respondents had disagreed with the classification a film or video or DVD had been given. The findings from the 2004 survey were closely in line with what had been found in 2000, with two-thirds

(66%) of respondents saying they had never or not very often disagreed with classifications, while less than a third (30%) said they had disagreed quite often, and a tiny number that they had always or almost always disagreed. There were no significant variations between the demographic subgroups.

How frequently have you disagreed with the classification a film/video/DVD has been given?				
	2000: Survey	2004: Survey	2004: QUEST	2004: website
	%	%	%	%
Never or not very often	66	66	65	45
Quite often	29	30	24	47
Always or almost always	4	3	4	8
Not stated	1	1	7	*

\* Less than 1

Of the on-line respondents, nearly half (47%) said they had quite often disagreed with a film's classification, and slightly fewer (45%) said they had never or not very often disagreed. It would seem that those who go to the cinema most often, i.e. at least once a week, also tend to disagree with the classification of films most often, as the proportion saying they never or not very often disagree with classification drops to only 40% among those fairly frequent cinema-goers.

### Young people and the role of the BBFC

The first of two questions about young people and the BBFC took the form of a statement saying that the BBFC should classify films and videos/DVDs so that those under 18 were protected from material which might cause them harm. Overall, 94% of respondents said they agreed with the statement, and there was little or no variation between demographic subgroups. Among the on-line respondents, a smaller proportion (76%) agreed with the statement, with 12% saying they were neutral and 13% saying they disagreed, which might suggest that a number of these respondents held principled views about the control of what people are allowed to see, rather than that they were uncaring about the protection of young people. This statement – but not the next – was used in the 2000 survey, and the pattern of responses found in 2004 was precisely the same as was found in 2000.

The second statement was similar, except that it asserted that the BBFC should protect young people from 'unsuitable' material, rather than from material which might cause harm. A very large majority of people (90%), although a slightly smaller proportion, agreed with this statement. It attracted support from somewhat fewer men than women (85% vs 93%), and from fewer younger people than older people (83% of those aged 18-24 compared with 95% of those aged 65+), but from the same proportions of those with and without children. Of the on-line respondents, 61% agreed, 19% were neutral, and 21% disagreed, with the same pattern of responses found among those with and without children.

Percentage responses to two statements about the role of the BBFC			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"The BBFC should protect young people under 18 from material which has the potential to cause them harm"	94	4	2
"The BBFC should protect young people under 18 from material that is unsuitable"	90	7	3

### Effects of viewing films

Three further statements sought to discover public attitudes to commonly held views about the media and their effects.

Percentage responses to three statements about the effects of watching films			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"Watching criminal or dangerous activity in films can sometimes lead to copycat behaviour in real life"	69	19	13
"Watching violence in films generally makes people more likely to be violent in real life"	45	27	28
"As people move from childhood to adulthood, they are better able to cope with disturbing imagery in films"	60	21	18

The first was the notion that people are liable to copy activities they see portrayed on the screen, including activities which are criminal or dangerous. The survey showed that a majority (69%) agreed with the statement, which was a smaller number than that found in 2000 (74%). More women than men expressed agreement (77% vs 59%), as did younger people compared with older people (53% of those aged 18-24 vs 84% of those aged 65+). The responses in the on-line survey were in starkest contrast: 26% agreed, 21% were neutral, and 53% disagreed.

The second statement expressed the belief that exposure to screen violence makes people more likely to be violent in real life. In the case of this statement, 45% said they agreed, 27% that they were neutral, and 28% that they disagreed. Again, fewer men than women expressed agreement, as did younger people compared with older people, and again fewer (12%) on-line respondents agreed. The findings were almost the same as had been found in 2000.

Thirdly, there was a statement saying that people are more able to cope with disturbing imagery as they grow to adulthood. A majority of people in the survey (60%) said they agreed, 21% were neutral, and 18% disagreed. The figures were very close to those of 2000, and the only demographic difference was between men and women, with more men than women agreeing (67% vs 54%). Of the on-line respondents, 74% agreed, 16% were neutral, and 10% disagreed.

### **What should be seen, and by whom**

Three further statements explored attitudes to what should be seen, and by whom. The first asserted that adults should be able to see whatever they want in films and on video and DVD. In the main survey, two-thirds (66%) agreed and about a fifth (19%) disagreed, with the remaining 14% being neutral, figures similar to those found in 2000. More men than women agreed (73% vs 60%), as did younger people compared with older respondents (80% of those aged 18-24, and 56% of those aged 55+). A substantially larger number (88%) of on-line respondents said they agreed.

The second statement said that younger people (under 18), too, should be able to watch whatever they want. Less than a tenth (9%) of respondents agreed, the same proportion were neutral, and 83% disagreed, figures almost the same as had been found in 2000. Slightly fewer (79%) men disagreed, as did the lowest age group of 18-24 year olds (69%). On-line respondents were only slightly more liberal in their view: 11% agreed, 15% were neutral, and 81% agreed.

Percentage responses to three statements about what should be seen in film, and by whom			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"Adults (over 18) should be able to watch whatever they want on film and video/DVD"	66	14	19
"Young people (under 18) should be able to watch whatever they want on film and video/DVD"	9	9	83
"Parents should have the final say on what their children watch on film and video/DVD"	81	9	10

The third statement said that parents should have the final say about the viewing of their children, and 81% – the same percentage as in 2000 – said they agreed. A few more women than men agreed (86% vs 77%), as did respondents with children aged 12-17 ( 87%), but somewhat fewer (73%) of the on-line respondents said they agreed.

### The BBFC Classification Guidelines

A section of the survey examined opinions about the BBFC classification Guidelines by asking whether respondents agreed or disagreed with two statements. The first, which expressed broad support for the Guidelines, attracted the agreement of approaching two-thirds of respondents, which was marginally more than the 59% who agreed in 2000. Only 11% disagreed, leaving a quarter (24%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. There was no particular variation among the demographic subgroups. About the same proportion (61%) of the on-line respondents agreed.

Percentage responses to two statements about the BBFC Guidelines			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"The Guidelines offer clear insight into the way films and videos/DVDs are classified"	63	24	11
"The Guidelines should contain more specific detail"	58	30	11

The second statement was mildly critical, suggesting the Guidelines should contain more 'specific details'. More than half the sample (58%) agreed with this statement, 30% said they were neutral, and 11% said they disagreed, which represented no change at all on the finding in the 2000 survey. Again there were no demographic differences. Of the on-line respondents, rather fewer (48%) said they agreed, with 34 saying they were neutral and 18% that they disagreed.

For each of nine topics, respondents were asked to say how important they thought that topic should be to the BBFC when it rated films. When ranked according to the percentages saying each was 'very important', drugs and drug taking headed the list, followed by violence, sexual activity and swearing and strong language, then by racial offence and religious offence, with cigarette smoking and drinking alcohol at the bottom of the ranking.

Percentages attaching degrees of importance to 9 issues in ratings films				
	Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not at all important
	%	%	%	%
"Drugs & drug taking"	75	20	5	1
"Violence"	65	28	6	1
"Sexual activity"	56	34	3	1
"Swearing & strong language"	49	37	12	2
"Racial references which might be offensive to some people"	46	39	12	3
"Religious references which might be offensive to some people"	34	42	18	5
"Nudity"	29	39	26	6
"Cigarette smoking"	25	38	28	9
"Drinking alcohol"	22	39	30	9

Far fewer on-line respondents rated any of the topics as 'very important', but the variation in their rank order was that 'racial references' were placed after 'sexual activity' and ahead of 'swearing & strong language'.

The research explored public attitudes to four potentially sensitive areas: sex, violence, language and drugs.

## Sex

A clear majority of people (58%) thought the sex standards in the Guidelines were about right, a marginally larger percentage than said the same thing in 2000. Few – though fewer than in 2000 – thought the standards too strict, but nearly a third thought them not strict enough, a slightly lower proportion than expressed this view in 2000.

Percentages believing that the sex standards outlined in the Guidelines are . . .			
	Too strict	About right	Not strict enough
2000	12	54	32
2004	10	58	30

Asked about the amount of sex allowed by the Guidelines in films with various ratings, nearly a third of respondents thought it was about right in every case from 'U' to '18', and in every case the proportion was higher than in 2000. In respect of films classified below '18', almost as many respondents thought the Guidelines allowed too little sex, but four in ten said that too much sex was allowed. In respect of '18' films, opinions followed a rather different pattern, with significantly fewer people believing the Guidelines permitted too much sex, and many more that they allowed too little. It seems that people see '18' rated films as being a special case, where more and more explicit sex is accepted, and indeed expected.

Sex Standards: Percentages believing the Guidelines . . .				
		Allow too much	Are about right	Allow too little
At 'U' & 'PG'	2000	43	25	30
	2004	40	32	27
At '12' / '12A'	2000	47	24	28
	2004	44	32	32
At '15'	2000	40	29	31
	2004	42	31	26
At '18'	2000	23	29	47
	2004	27	32	41

A further question asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "People over 18 have a right to see graphic portrayals of real sex in films and videos/DVDs". Nearly 30% were neutral in their attitude (compared with 23% in

2000), while exactly half agreed (compared with 46% in 2000) and only 22% disagreed (down from 31% in 2000).

The 2004 research did not include group discussions on portrayals of sex and sexual references.

### R18 Classification

The questions about sex were followed by two about material classified R18: "Videos/DVDs given the special 'R18' rating (Restricted 18) contain explicit, real sex between consenting adults. They are available only through licensed sex shops, and can be obtained only by adults over the age of 18. Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements". ('Agree strongly'/'agree' and 'Strongly disagree'/'disagree' percentages are combined.) A relatively modest 17% of respondents were neutral about the statements, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. In the case of the first statement, which expresses the position of the BBFC, a narrow majority agreed, while nearly a third disagreed. With regard to the second, extreme, statement, however, less than a quarter agreed and a very clear majority disagreed.

Percentage responses to two statements about the 'R18' classification			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"There should be no limits on what can be shown in 'R18' videos/DVDs, providing they do not contain sexual violence, or break the law"	52	17	31
"There should be no limits on what can be shown in 'R18' videos/DVDs"	23	17	60

As has been said, a very large majority of people completing the interview on the website opted for the more liberal view in answering every question, but the website responses to the second, more extreme, of these two statements were the exception. In this instance, more people disagreed with the statement than agreed with it, by a proportion of 47% to 37%, with 16% being neutral.

### Violence

Just over half of respondents (53%) thought the violence standards outlined in the Guidelines were about right, while a very substantial minority (41%) thought they were not strict enough, and just a handful (5%) thought they were too strict.

Percentages believing that the violence standards outlined in the Guidelines are . .			
	Too strict	About right	Not strict enough
2000	5	51	42
2004	4	53	41

The qualitative research showed violence to be the most salient single theme when people were invited to talk about films. This is not surprising since, with sex, it is the aspect of film on which popular journalism most frequently dwells, simply because it can provide dramatic and scary stories which are ideally suited to purple prose. Film violence has such a long history as a major cause of concern that it would be amazing if it had not emerged in this research as the most salient single theme. And yet, as is well known, the evidence that screen violence can lead to violence in real life is at best equivocal. A causal relationship has been proposed again and again, but has never been established.

Not only was it a dominant theme in discussions, however, but respondents said it was central when they were reaching a decision about whether or not to see a film, and it had a considerable impact on how people felt about the use of strong language, and about the portrayal of drugs. The general opinion was that violence in contemporary films is more graphic and more realistic than it used to be, and that movies are increasingly violent as film makers push the boundaries of the acceptable.

*“Film producers seem to feel that if someone makes a violent film, they have to make one even more violent and gory and it just escalates from there.”*

*“You can tell it’s changed. ‘15’ never used to be as scary and an ‘18’ keeps you up all night now.”*

On the other hand, a number of respondents saw current levels of violence as necessary.

*“It can be everything – more action, more excitement. Keeps you going, otherwise you could be falling asleep.”*

Age was the most important influence on the opinions expressed, and, while 41% of all respondents said the Guidelines were “not strict enough”, that view was held by 63% of people aged 65+, but by only 23% of those aged 18-24.

Parents had a special interest in the topic, but their opinions were very mixed and their level of concern was little different from that of people the same age without children.

*“It’s not a concern because I know it doesn’t affect him. He doesn’t have nightmares or act weirdly.”*

*“I worry about long term emotional damage and loss of innocence.”*

*“Children know what is right and wrong. A violent film is not going to change a lifetime of being brought up properly.”*

The matter of sexual violence was raised spontaneously in most groups in the qualitative research. Even those people who claimed to be de-sensitised to violence found the subject disturbing, because, they said, it relates to the power relationships between men and women. It was disturbing for women because it felt too real, and because they saw it as something that might happen to them. Respondents thought the offensiveness of sexual violence in films was unlikely to be mitigated by fantasy or by comic contexts.

When respondents were asked about the appropriateness of the Guidelines for violence in respect of the various classifications, replies were uniform across the several classifications. In each case, around 30% thought the Guidelines allowed neither too little nor too much violence, i.e. were right; about 45% thought they allowed too much; and about a quarter (25%) thought they allowed too little

In 2004, compared with 2000, more people thought the Guidelines were about right, or indeed were too strict, for ‘U’ and ‘PG’, for ‘12’/‘12A’, and for ‘15’ films. Opinions about the Guidelines for ‘18’ films had changed in the other direction, however, with more people in 2004 than in 2000 feeling the Guidelines allowed too much violence, and fewer feeling they allowed too little, while the proportion saying the Guidelines were about right remained roughly the same.

Violence: Percentages believing the Guidelines . . .				
		Allow too much	Are about right	Allow too little
At 'U' & 'PG'	2000	53	23	24
	2004	44	30	26
At '12' / '12A'	2000	55	22	22
	2004	48	29	23
At '15'	2000	51	26	23
	2004	49	28	23
At '18'	2000	37	30	34
	2004	40	31	30

As with attitudes to sex, attitudes to violence were strongly associated with age. Of those respondents aged 18-24 who were asked whether the Guidelines for the '15' rating allowed too much violence, 4% said they strongly agreed that they did, compared with 35% of respondents aged 65+.

When people were asked whether three different settings affected how acceptable they found violence, their responses were pretty evenly balanced, with a quarter saying neither yes nor no. When asked if violence was more acceptable in comic settings and in 'terror' settings, just under 40% said it was, and the same proportion said it was not. When asked about historical or fantasy settings, however, a slightly higher proportion of people (44%) said those settings made violence more acceptable, while a slightly lower proportion (30%) said they did not.

Percentages believing that violence is more acceptable . . .			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
in a comic setting	38	25	37
in historical or fantasy settings	44	26	30
in a 'terror' setting	39	26	34

The qualitative research suggested that, in general, people are well content with the classification criteria in respect of violence, and with the way they work. Violence was recognised as complex, and respondents tended to sympathise with the BBFC's task.

*"They have a hard job but the Guidelines are broadly about right."*

*"I don't think you can be objective when it comes to violence in film, it is really quite subjective. I think that they have a hard job really."*

*"The whole purpose of the ratings is to advise you so you can make up your own mind. We can't agree here, so how are 56 million people going to agree. Surely they should tell you in as much detail as they can what sort of thing you can expect and then you have to decide."*

## Language

Just over half the respondents said they thought the language standards outlined in the Guidelines were about right, a proportion slightly up on the figure found in 2000.

Percentages believing that the language standards outlined in the Guidelines are:			
	Too strict	About right	Not strict enough
2000	5	48	43
2004	5	51	43

As with many matters, attitudes to language standards were strongly associated with sex and age: more men than women thought the Guidelines were about right (60% vs 42%), as did people aged 18-24 compared with those aged 65+ (70% vs 25%).

The qualitative research found a widespread view that 'bad' language was becoming more prevalent. Respondents said it had become part of everyday life, which was demonstrated by the fact it had found its way into dictionaries. They mentioned its presence in music and on television, and they said it was impossible to protect children from its influence, and therefore to control their use of bad language. Asked about their major concerns, people spoke of violence, of drugs – especially of hard drugs – of sex and sexual abuse, and of racism as 'macro-problems', but identified bad language as a pervasive 'micro-problem'. The qualitative research supported the survey research in showing concern to be greater among women than among men, and greater among older people than among younger people. Younger people, men, and people with older children were more relaxed in their attitudes, or perhaps simply resigned to bad language.

*"The age of the people who swear is younger and more women are swearing now."*

*"I don't think swearing is as big a deal to kids as it was to us when we were children. I don't think it's right, but it's not shocking."*

Among the points about language raised by the focus groups was its link with violence. People thought it inevitable that bad language should accompany violence, but nevertheless found it disturbing and almost unacceptable in that context.

*"If it's a heavy film, the violence and swearing will resonate more on your brain than if it's a quick throwaway line."*

Respondents thought it proper that films should contain bad language when it was part of the reality being portrayed, and distinguished such use from what was seen as gratuitous use, which was thought to glamorise bad language and to make it the more imitable. People said that the characters employing bad language influenced its acceptability, or at least its perceived strength. It was acceptable when protagonists were the same gender, or age, or race, or were friends, but less so when it was from a man to a woman, an adult to a child, or an aggressor to a victim.

*"If something like 'fuck' is said very quickly in the context of a conversation then it's acceptable. But if it's a direct 'fuck off' then it wouldn't be."*

There was widespread recognition that humour softened the impact of strong language, and spontaneous mentions of **Four Weddings and a Funeral**.

*“It’s the context again. In **Love Actually**, she come in and goes to the Prime Minister, ‘Oh shit’. He turns and says, ‘It could have been worse, you could have said “Oh fuck”’. I know it’s swearing, but in that context it was funny.”*

Asked about the Guidelines on language as they related to the various classifications, between a quarter and a third of respondents said they were about right, while about half thought they allowed too much bad language, and just under a quarter thought the Guidelines were too strict. In the case of films rated ‘18’, the same proportion thought the Guidelines were about right, but compared with the Guidelines for other classifications, 15% fewer people thought they allowed too much, and 10% that they allowed too little.

Language: Percentages believing the Guidelines . . .				
		Allow too much	Are about right	Allow too little
At ‘U’ & ‘PG’	2000	53	23	24
	2004	44	30	26
At ‘12’/ ‘12A’	2000	55	22	22
	2004	48	29	23
At ‘15’	2000	51	26	23
	2004	49	28	23
At ‘18’	2000	37	30	34
	2004	40	31	30

The survey also asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Young people use bad language because of what they hear in films and videos/DVDs.” The qualitative research suggested that most people see a complex relationship between what is seen and heard in the media, including films, and what happens in everyday life – especially when they have a chance to discuss and reflect on the relationship. Faced with a direct question, as in the survey, opinions were less ambivalent and only 17% said they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, while 59% said they agreed, and 24% said they disagreed.

## Drugs

When asked about drug standards in the research in 2000, slightly more respondents said the Guidelines were not strict enough than thought they were about right (47% vs 45%). In 2004, however, the position was reversed, and substantially more said the Guidelines were about right than said they were not strict enough (52% vs 43%), suggesting a change in opinion over the period.

Percentages believing that the drugs standards outlined in the Guidelines are . . .			
	Too strict	About right	Not strict enough
2000	4	45	47
2004	4	52	43

A similar conclusion can be reached from the responses to questions about the Guidelines in respect of each different classification: for each classification, more people than in 2000 said the Guidelines were about right. In each case a higher proportion of people thought the Guidelines allowed too much drug use or reference to drug use than thought they allowed too little or who were neutral, but no great importance should be attached to the finding in respect of drug standards since a similar pattern is found in respect of sex, violence and language as well.

Drug standards: Percentages believing the Guidelines . . .				
		Allow too much	Are about right	Allow too little
At 'U' & 'PG'	2000	46	23	31
	2004	38	29	33
At '12' / '12A'	2000	53	21	25
	2004	45	29	24
At '15'	2000	55	21	23
	2004	49	27	23
At '18'	2000	46	25	29
	2004	42	32	26

As generally happens, the qualitative research gave a more subtle, as well as a more detailed, picture of people's attitudes to drugs in film and drug standards in the BBFC Guidelines.

Asked about drugs and the media in general, there were spontaneous comments about television and unfavourable comparisons between television and film.

*"I thought **Footballers' Wives** was wrong – you saw her regularly snorting coke but you never saw her addiction, no negative outcome. Thought that was pretty shocking actually."*

*"Some things that are on just after 9 are too much."*

*"I think the cinema is a bit tighter than TV – I think TV should tighten up."*

Associated largely, though not wholly, with age, there was a divide between those who had positive and negative images of drugs in films. The positive imagery connected drugs with movies that were action-packed, violent, exciting and adult, and that had a gritty storyline.

*"It's probably an action film. Exciting."*

*"It's like motorsport. You don't go to see people crashing but it's exciting when it happens."*

The imagery is negative for those people who see the drug-taking itself, rather than seeing it in the context of a storyline.

*"Drugs in films is a real turn-off for me."*

*"Showing scenes how they do it. It makes my stomach turn."*

Respondents had clear expectations of the films which might refer to drugs and those which were unlikely to.

*"Usually in drug scenes in films there is supporting violence and swearing. You don't get nice films where someone is just on drugs. All those things usually go together."*

Respondents commented also on the imagery, the mood and the tone of films with portrayals of hard drugs, and contrasted them with the imagery, mood and tone of films with soft drugs. The former were seen as violent, dark, dirty, frightening, cold and wet; the latter as relaxed, fun, light-hearted, recreational and inclusive. People

thought that humour could have an effect on the mood and tone of a film with drug references, but only up to a point.

The qualitative research suggested widespread support for the existing Guidelines, and stronger support than might be supposed from the survey findings. The Guidelines were perceived as very much in line with public opinion. When they were discussed in detail they met with a positive response, and what was seen as a responsible stance on the part of the BBFC was compared favourably with television in particular.

*“I think they’re very close to our way of thinking.”*

*“They are pretty much what we have just said.”*

*“We seem to be saying the things that are down here – there are always going to be areas that are difficult but the principles seem right.”*

## 12A

A section of the survey began with this introduction:

In August 2002 the BBFC changed the ‘12’ classification for cinema films, which prevented children under 12 from entering the cinema, to 12A, which allows children under 12 to see a 12A film if accompanied by an adult. 12A rated films come with Consumer Advice, that is, information about whether the film contains bad language, violence, sex etc. The advice is available in the cinema listings in local papers, on TV and newspaper adverts and on posters.

Respondents were asked whether they had noticed the Consumer Advice: most people (58%) said they had not, but a very large minority (41%) said they had. The subgroups most likely to have seen the Consumer Advice were younger people (50%), people with children (46%) – especially children aged 9-11 (65%) – and frequent cinema goers (55%).

Those who said they had noticed the Consumer Advice were asked whether they had found it useful.

How useful do you find Consumer Advice in helping you decide whether you or your children should see a particular film?	
Very useful – I always look at the Consumer Advice	42%
Quite useful – I use it when deciding what my children should watch	44%
Not useful – I never take it into consideration	11.00%

Base: 508

All respondents were then asked whether they thought it would be a good idea “to include this Consumer Advice for all films regardless of classification”. A very substantial majority (87%) said they thought it would be a good idea, and only 10% disagreed, with 3% not saying.

The survey questionnaire went on with a further explanation:

The 12A rating means that the BBFC believes the film most suitable for children of 12 years and over. Parents can decide if children younger than

12 should see the film, but younger children must be accompanied by an adult.

All respondents were asked, "Do you think that children of any age should be allowed into 12A films (provided they are accompanied by an adult)?" Across the whole group, 35% said they should, but 65% that they should not. More men than women said they should (42% vs 28%), as did younger people compared with older people (50% vs 25%).

When those respondents who had disagreed that children of any age might be taken to watch 12A films were asked whether they thought there should be a lower age limit, 43% said there should be a lower age limit, and 55% said there should not. What was conspicuous within these figures was that a higher proportion of people with children approaching and around the age of twelve said there should be a lower age limit.

Percentages thinking there should be a lower age limit for children seeing 12A films?						
	Respondents with children aged					Having no children
	5 and under	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	
Yes	46	53	61	54	37	41
No	51	47	39	45	60	57
No reply	2	-	-	1	4	2

Base 806

The respondents who did not think children of any age should be allowed into 12A films, and who thought there should be a lower age limit, were asked what that age limit should be. The majority (66%) said the lower age limit should be either 10 or 11, while a quarter said 8 or 9, and just six people said 5, 6 or 7.

As has been said, the survey identified a minority of 41% who were aware of the 12/12A classification and the accompanying consumer advice, and a larger group who were aware of neither. The qualitative research identified three groups

- Those who understand the concept of 12A
- Those who understand some (but not all) of the principles of 12A
- Those ignorant or confused about 12A

Confirming the findings of the survey, the focus groups showed those who understood 12A to be, in general, frequent cinema goers and people with a lively interest in film, and people with 9-11 year old children. For these respondents, the 12A classification and the thinking behind it, together with the consumer advice, worked well. It was well matched to their actual behaviour, it enabled them to exercise their own judgement, and it allowed them to visit the cinema as a family or to see films which adults and children could enjoy together.

*"It's guidance for the parent I think. Whether the parent will allow that child to watch it."*

*"I had to ask my son what 12A meant. My knowledge of 12A started to be around when **Spider-Man** came out."*

*"If your child is just under 12, it's up to the adult."*

The respondents who had only a partial grasp of what was meant by a 12A tended to be more infrequent film goers, and to have had less contact with 12A films, commonly because their children were younger, and going to see films rated PG. They understood they could take younger children, but tended not to appreciate (or perhaps to ignore) the '12' part of the rating, reading it as '12 and under'. For these people, therefore, the boundaries between '12A' and 'PG' became blurred, which was not helped when they saw young children in the cinema for 12A films.

*“So you can take a four year-old to a 12A? That’s so wrong! So why not have a PG instead of a 12?”*

The 12A seemed to be working well in that the family was enabled to have a cinema outing, but there were problems arising from their ignorance. Seeing – and often hearing – young children had an unwelcome impact on the rest of the audience, and the impact on young children themselves could be unwelcome when the film proved to be inappropriate.

Those people who had failed to grasp the meaning and intention of 12A tended to have younger children, aged eight and under, or older teenagers, and to be infrequent cinema goers. They interpreted the 'A' as standing for 'adult', as in 'more adult content', and so they saw it as a new classification somewhere between 12 and 15. They thought it must be a rating for films which required adult supervision of children aged twelve plus.

*“Somebody over the age of 12? Age 12 accompanied by an adult?”*

*“This is a category which is between a 12 and a 15.”*

The '12' classification on videos and DVDs was familiar to almost all respondents, and was well understood. Those unfamiliar with the '12A' cinema rating, however, were thoroughly confused by the relationship of the two.

*“No. It doesn’t make sense.”*

*“No it should all be the same otherwise it’s confusing.”*

*“If there’s no difference in the picture, then there should be no difference.”*

*“I don’t think people really understand it. You go to the cinema and a film is classified 12A. You go to the video shop and the same film is a 12.”*

Awareness of the Consumer Advice on videos and DVDs seemed to be very low. Other messages about the film grabbed people's attention, and so Consumer Advice got lost in the marketing mix and overall imagery. It appeared that those who best understood '12A' had a much greater awareness of Consumer Advice and claimed to look for it.

When respondents were asked about Consumer Advice in relation to films showing in the cinemas, and were shown examples, they felt that their lack of awareness was fully justified.

*“The writing is too small. You need a magnifying glass to read it.”*

*“It needs bigger print. Don’t hide it in small print.”*

There was a general cynicism about the size of the copy, and respondents assumed that the industry was deliberately keeping consumers in the dark.

Once all respondents had grasped the concept and intention of the '12A' classification, opinion tended to polarise. On the one hand were parents with little concern.

*"Rocky . . . because it's not what I call violent. It's only boxing which is OK."*

*"Saving Private Ryan. There were some graphic facts, but it was like a true story. He enjoyed the film and he is only 10."*

*"Action films like Bond. That was violent but it's family violent. If it's historical type violent like Zulu, I would have no problem with that or with fantasy like Lord of the Rings."*

*"Stand by Me. It's a 12 but she is only 8. I just used my own discretion having seen it myself."*

On the other hand other parents displayed much greater concern.

*"Sex. My 13 year old hears it at school. He doesn't need any prompting so I wouldn't put it on."*

*"I think kids are educated in bad language as it is without having it in the living room. Drugs as well."*

*"I would draw the line at sexual nudity and really bad language."*

There was a polarisation, too, between those who supported the '12A' classification, and those who, even when the concept had been explained, remained detractors. The supporters recognised that the '12A' rating could empower parents and was consonant with their wish to make their own decisions, while putting their children at the centre of those decisions.

*"They are giving you the choice and leaving you to decide which I suppose on Spider-Man you would have done."*

*"I agree with it. Thinking now about what's been said, you have the choice as a parent."*

*"It empowers parents."*

There did remain a substantial group of people who appeared unable to cope with the complexity of the issue. Either they did not want to think too hard, or they shied away from making a decision, or they lacked confidence, or they were simply not that interested.

*"It puts more pressure on us. We have to make the decision."*

From the perspective of market research, the 41% of people who had at least a reasonable awareness and understanding of the '12A' classification was impressive: there are not many innovative concepts which achieve such a level of public awareness in less than two years. It was striking how many respondents who had only a very imperfect grasp of '12A' at the outset of the research quickly came to a

full understanding. Problems remained, however, and there were not only those who remained hostile to the rating, but those who were constructively critical.

*“The current level of advice is not enough and there are lots of opportunities to tell us about the film but I think they choose not to. I think the manufacturers don’t want you to know, they just want you to buy.”*

*I want more information about these films. There’s a lot of peer pressure, and they want to see these films, they say everybody watched them – in reality they haven’t. It makes you question your judgement. I want more support for my judgement.”*

*“At the end of the day you are the parent and you should decide. Make more about our responsibility to make the decision.”*

For the future, the qualitative researchers identified four core messages that need to be reinforced:

- It’s a ‘12’ rated film, suitable for those aged 12 and above
- Among other things, the ‘A’ stands for ‘advisory’
- It is for parents to decide if a child younger than 12 should see the film
- There is consumer advice available to aid the decision

At the end of this section of the survey, respondents were asked for their opinion about taking young people under the age of 15 to ‘15’ rated films, and those under 18 to ‘18’ rated films. The section was introduced thus:

Cinema films rated ‘U’, ‘PG’ and ‘12A’ should contain nothing likely to harm young children. Films rated ‘15’ and ‘18’, however, may contain things which could be harmful to young children. Please indicate the extent which you agree/disagree with the following statements.

This was worded slightly differently from the equivalent question about ‘12A’ films, but the proportion of people saying that young people under 15 should be able to see ‘15’ rated films if accompanied by an adult (32%) was broadly similar to the proportion endorsing the BBFC’s ‘12A’ rule (32%). Attitudes to those under 18 being able to see ‘18’ films when accompanied by someone of at least 18 showed more caution, but were far from being wholly hostile. (Figures for ‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly agree’ have been combined, as have those for ‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly disagree’.)

Percentages holding views about accompanied children seeing ‘12A’, ‘15’ and ‘18’ films			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
“Children under the age of 15 should be able to see ‘15’ rated films if accompanied by an adult”	32	19	49
“Children under the age of 18 should be able to see ‘18’ rated films if accompanied by an adult”	24	17	59
“Do you think that children of any age should be allowed into ‘12A’ films (provided they are accompanied by an adult)?”	‘Yes’: 35%		‘No’: 65%

## Film Trailers

The survey asked about trailers:

Film trailers are rated according to the same guidelines as films. It has been suggested that trailers should be rated more strictly than films because cinema goers know nothing about a trailer before it is shown. Do you agree with this?

Less than a quarter (23%) of respondents agreed with this, ticking the box, 'Yes – trailers should be rated more strictly', whereas 77% ticked the other box, 'No – trailers should be rated to the same guidelines as films'.

## Smoking

The last section in the survey concerned the portrayal of smoking in films. Respondents had five statements, and were asked for each statement to tick one of five boxes: 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree' or 'Strongly disagree'.

The statement which elicited the most vehement reaction was the total prohibition on smoking being shown in any film, with which 41% said they strongly disagreed and a further 34% said they disagreed, giving a total disagreement from three-quarters (75%) of the respondents.

Three other statements elicited a majority either agreeing or disagreeing. A clear majority (57%) said they did not mind seeing smoking providing it was necessary or appropriate to the storyline, whereas only 15% dissented from that view, and more than a quarter said they were neutral; the proposition that the 'hero' of a film should not be seen smoking was opposed by more than half (53%) the respondents; the third statement with which a majority (52%) disagreed was, "I never notice people smoking in films", while remainder of respondents were evenly divided between those who said they agreed, and those who said they were neutral.

Finally there was the statement, "Smoking should not be shown in films likely to be seen by children". More people disagreed than agreed with this statement (46% vs 37%), but there was a majority neither for it nor against it.

Percentages agreeing/disagreeing with five statements about smoking			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"Smoking should not be seen in any film"	19	16	75
"Smoking should not be shown in films likely to be seen by children"	37	17	46
"The 'hero' of the film should not be shown smoking"	29	19	53
"I never notice people smoking in films"	24	25	52
"I don't mind seeing smoking in a film providing it is necessary or appropriate to the storyline"	57	27	15

At the end of the focus groups that discussed drugs, the issue of smoking tobacco in films was raised. The discussions were short, however, since the idea that films might be rated for smoking was rejected forcefully and without exception.

*"If they got into smoking they would have to get into drinking. Then they'll get into healthy eating!"*

*“Smoking is legal so they don’t have a right to control it.”*

*“You can take your kids to the beach and you wouldn’t expect to see people taking drugs or having sex, but if they were smoking, that’s fine and up to them.”*