

# STARTING A COMMUNITY CINEMA



## DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY CINEMA

**Community Cinema (CC):** any volunteer-led and nonprofit-making organisation that shows films in its local area. This includes: film societies and clubs in communities and neighbourhoods, schools, colleges and universities; screenings in village halls, arts centres, cinemas, youth and community centres; mobile cinemas; and local film festivals.

### Overview

If you're thinking about setting up and running a CC you're treading a well-defined path that many have followed successfully before you. You can be confident that every problem you encounter will have been solved many times, in many different ways. The British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS) exists partly to make sure that this weight of experience is at your disposal, so your task becomes easier and the success of your venture becomes more secure.

BFFS is at the centre of a network of community exhibitors throughout the UK. These range from groups operating in cities and towns, where films are readily available, to organisations in rural areas where CCs can be the only form of cinema provision. Both urban and rural CCs continue to be popular because they select their own programme of films, provide an enjoyable communal atmosphere and develop the viewing experience with special seasons, discussions and social events. In towns or cities CCs may meet in their local cinema or multiplex, or find their own venue in an arts centre. Smaller rural groups may operate in school or community halls but it's all down to finding the right venue for your community - there are no fixed rules.

This leaflet is designed to give an introduction to how to get started. Where additional information is available on the BFFS website ([www.bffs.org.uk](http://www.bffs.org.uk)), a clear reference is given. The BFFS Community Cinema Sourcebook deals with many topics in more detail.

### Starting a community cinema – the road map

- get yourself organised - form a small working group
- find a venue - this will have a strong influence on what follows
- decide how you wish to operate
- organise a test screening - BFFS may be able to assist you with this
- gauge the interest for the venture and sign up some volunteers to form a committee - the test screening is a good place to do this

Once you have a venue and a committee, you need to get down to detailed planning:

- decide what projection technology you are going to use, and if you need to buy equipment
- develop plans for obtaining funding
- work out how much you need to make, to at least break even over your first year and let this determine your ticket prices and membership subscriptions
- book the venue dates for your first season
- choose your first programme, book the films, publicise it and run it.

## 1. What makes community cinemas special?

- they are run by their members and audiences for their members and audiences, and they give communities the power to determine their own film culture
- they provide a warm friendly atmosphere, in which every audience member can feel welcomed and secure
- they take films seriously, selecting some of the best films around, and ensuring that viewing conditions are the best possible
- they arrange special screenings and social events, and provide an opportunity to discuss the films they show
- they can provide varied and adventurous programming, including short films, independent film-makers' work and films of local and historical interest
- they may offer advantages in respect of film hire costs

## 2. Forming a working group

You can't do it on your own. A small group can have the advantages of spreading the workload, sustaining morale and bringing more than one point of view to bear when it comes to decision-making. It's also critically important to enable thorough discussion at an early stage in order to help with some of the decisions you will make – such as the type of licensing arrangement you will have with film distributors, which will need careful thought and detailed discussion. At the working group stage you will not have established roles in place but the way people engage with the working group will give a clear indication of their approach to committee work. The production of an initial task plan is recommended, to ensure your group shares an understanding of what needs to be done, by whom and when.

## 3. Finding a venue

The most useful first exercise a working group can undertake is to evaluate local venues and choose the best one to host your CC. This choice can have a determining effect. For example, there might be a venue with a 35mm projector and projectionist available, which might lead you to run 'commercial' shows. These allow you to charge at the door and let in the general public, i.e. more akin to the 'theatrical' screenings that commercial cinemas operate.

Otherwise, there might be a choice of local halls, of which the nicest might be the smallest: this could lead you to decide to screen as a closed, membership-only organisation, where your members would easily fill the hall for a film show.

If a venue has 35mm projection, it will most likely be organised as a cinema already, in which case you will need to evaluate the state of the equipment, the seating and the rental charge. Then you can decide whether a CC could be made to work there. Otherwise you will probably be evaluating venues for digital projection, which usually involves installing a projector, a DVD or Blu-ray player, a sound system, a screen, and taking the installation apart afterwards. Bear in mind that you will also need to set out and clear away seating for each film show. Many CCs operate successfully in this way.

### Checklist when considering a venue for projection

- venue size - can you fit in a decent sized screen? Is there sufficient room for your projector (and are there enough power points)? Is there space for a front-of-house desk?
- does it have good enough black-out?
- will noise or acoustics cause a problem? Consider if the noise of your projector, or other activity at or near the venue, will interfere with your screening. Reverberation ('echo') can be checked by clapping and listening to what comes back.

- how many people will it comfortably hold? There must be a gap between the screen and the front row and you need to take wheelchair access into account. Seating layout is usually fan-shaped, not rectangular to enable the best view for the most.
- is the seating comfortable enough? This is much more important than you might think.
- are the heating and cooling systems effective?
- are key facilities (e.g., toilets) available and easily accessible to all, including audience members with disabilities?
- is there a kitchen or bar area with the capacity to provide refreshments?
- is there car-parking nearby?
- does it have a Premises Licence that includes 'Cinema' (permission from the Local Authority for shows to be put on) and all other required licences for your activity?
- is the venue fully insured for public liability, and does this cover your film screenings e.g., equipment?

**More information and advice on choosing the right venue for your community screenings is available from the BFFS Community Cinema Sourcebook.**

#### **4. Mode of operation**

##### **Licences**

No matter what kind of film screening organisation you plan to run, if you are going to show a film to an audience you must have a licence from the distributor who owns the rights to show the film. In practice this means hiring a copy of the film from the distributor or their agent on terms that include payment for the licence. Films can be hired this way on 35mm film, DVD, Blu-ray and occasionally on VHS tape or 16 mm film. Downloads may be available in the near future.

In general, CCs have the choice of two ways of screening films. This is dictated by the way the film rental market works:

- a 'non-commercial' licence allows members **only** to attend the film screening. Usually this licence does not allow tickets to be paid for in advance or on the door, or permit any advertising of the film screening outside of the membership scheme.

OR

- a 'commercial' licence allows members and the general public to attend the film screening. Payment can either be taken in advance of the screening or on the door. This licence allows a free hand in advertising films screened under it.

The 'non-commercial' licence may be paid for by audience member subscriptions collected at the start of each season or year. It may be possible to hire films at an advantageous flat rate on the non-commercial licence. Less paperwork may also be involved.

The 'commercial' licence is paid for by a percentage of the total ticket income OR a minimum amount - the 'minimum guarantee' (ranging from £80-£100 for DVD hire) - whichever is the greater. The amount paid is dependent on the size of the audience. After a screening using this licence type you will be required to complete a 'return' to the distributor that lists how many people attended and ticket income.

It is possible for a CC to screen films using both sorts of licences, although care must be taken to adhere to the conditions of the relevant licence for the corresponding film.

In general the use of the commercial licence gives greater freedom of operation, the ability to build an audience in the course of a season by external advertising, a much higher profile and the ability to access more potential members. Against this is the fact that more work is involved in publicising the programme and in running what is in effect a small not-for-profit business. Deciding how you will operate is a complex process with far-reaching consequences. In the run-up to setting up your CC much of the preparation will be focused on getting this balance right.

## **Membership**

Membership schemes offer several advantages regardless of which sort of screening licence you use. Greater financial security is derived from receiving most of your income at the start of the year or season (a part year of membership that may also cover entry to a number of films) and you have the freedom to be more adventurous in your choice of films - once people have paid their membership they are likely to come even to unfamiliar films.

If you screen using a commercial licence it is still a good idea to operate a membership scheme and to offer season tickets to members at prices that encourage enrolment. If you choose not to operate a membership scheme you will need to balance the books by including a number of sure-fire hits in your programme. As your preparations get more serious, you should review the BFFS Community Cinema Sourcebook which gives this topic and others more detailed consideration (available from BFFS).

## **5. Test screenings**

If you are ready to think about a test screening then it's time to get in touch with BFFS. We can help with advice on the choice of film and ways of getting hold of it. We may be able to help by lending you the equipment for your screening. If you are in an area with other CCs close by, we can probably put you in touch with local support as well. A test screening is a good opportunity to ask people which mode of operation would suit them best – the need to bring in membership subscriptions big enough to cover the cost of hiring the films is often a decisive factor.

## **6. Forming a committee**

CC committees work best when they are made up of people ready to undertake a well defined set of roles. A typical committee will look something like this. Note that some of the roles can be combined but the first three are best kept separate.

**The chair** runs the meetings, keeps the committee members focused and makes sure key decisions are made.

**The secretary** organises meeting agendas, writes the minutes, replies to correspondence and is in charge of the general day-to-day administration of the organisation.

**The treasurer** monitors income and expenditure, keeps the books, prepares the annual accounts and is involved in obtaining grants and fundraising.

**A membership secretary** for managing applications, records and communications can be very helpful to share the load with the secretary.

**The booking officer** ensures that once a programme is settled all films are booked, that they subsequently arrive and are available for projection.

**The publicity officer** produces the publicity materials and may have a strategic role in planning publicity activities.

**The front-of-house manager** is responsible for all ticketing, handling money at the door and banking it, and making returns on the take and on the audience size. They may also develop a working relationship with venue staff.

**The projectionist** may also be the technical supremo, responsible for ensuring the quality of the viewing experience.

Most of these roles require a certain level of expertise and benefit from being performed by someone of an appropriate professional background (e.g. a book-keeper as treasurer).

## 7. Putting on a film

Your organisation will have to work out the technical base for its operation. Around 85% of UK CCs project from DVD, while others use 35mm film. Very few CCs project occasionally from 16mm film, but few titles are now available, and this technology has had its day.

If you have access to 35mm or high-end digital projection, then it's likely that you will have access to a cinema style venue and professional projection staff. In such circumstances, as long as the finances make sense, you should take advantage of these facilities. You will have to acquire a distinct set of working practices, as well as the knowledge that goes with them, but nothing too demanding is involved and the venue will be able to support the process.

DVD projection equipment is relatively cheap and easy to configure and operate. The film distribution industry is now fairly well geared up to DVD rentals for exhibition, so this is a low-resistance route.

Additional advantages to DVD projection include a plentiful number equipment suppliers well-attuned to the needs of film societies, and direct route to lottery funding geared to the scale of bid that may help a CC obtain a full set of kit (Google 'Awards for All' or 'Big Lottery').

There is also the prospect of higher-quality results from the same equipment as hi-definition (Blu-ray) disks become more widely available. 'Best buys' change all the time - the BFFS exhibitors network can help you find out what CCs have used and found satisfactory especially in the realm of projectors (go to: [www.bffs.org.uk/forum/](http://www.bffs.org.uk/forum/)).

When you're ready to buy, a local audio/visual supplier is probably your best bet - look for one that is prepared to come to your venue and give you a demonstration. The internet is awash with sites trying to sell projectors, DVD players and so on but these sites are mainly aimed at the home cinema market and the projectors at least will not be suitable for most venues. Make clear your requirements at the outset. A useful reference point is: [www.projectorcentral.com](http://www.projectorcentral.com).

### **Digital projection DVD equipment - what you will need**

- a DLP (or LCD) data projector
- a player (DVD or Blu-ray)
- a sound system (including a receiver or amplifier and loudspeakers)
- a screen
- a cueing display (this is very useful for the projectionist)
- hard cases for each item (must have for portable equipment)
- cables to connect the equipment

**More information and advice on selecting technical equipment and presenting your film show is available from the BFFS Community Cinema Sourcebook.**

## 8. Getting organised, finances and budgets

By this time you'll have a good idea of the sort of organisation you want to be, the sort of things you want to achieve and how you'll go about putting this into practice. This means it's time to draft a Constitution. This will describe your aims and objectives, your membership scheme and how you will operate financially. It is invaluable for obtaining grants and should include an aim of 'education'. Contact BFFS for a model Constitution to fit your needs.

Once you've started looking into the possibilities of venues, licences and equipment you'll have a much clearer idea of the start-up and running costs for your organisation. At this stage some financial modelling is in order as you consider your expenditures and estimate your income. For example, the number of members and/or ticket buyers you can expect will help you set membership subscriptions/ticket prices. It is

important to consider what other income you can expect from sales of refreshments or by advertising local businesses in your programme. This will enable you to put together a rough budget and a cash-flow for your first year of operation. Remember to include your insurance needs e.g., equipment damage/loss and public liability cover. It is good practice to build up a contingency fund for unexpected events.

## **9. Fundraising**

It is possible to start with borrowed equipment, and initially BFFS may be able to help with this. However, a far better solution is to make fundraising for equipment purchase your first priority. Fundraising will also allow you to cover pre-season costs such as publicity and cope with any shortfall in box office receipts, if you are operating on a commercial basis in screening to members and the general public.

Your fundraising strategy should have four main strands:

1. Check whether the UK Film Council or your National/Regional Screen Agency is operating any funding schemes that you may be able to apply to.
2. Make an application to the Big Lottery Fund, or other funding agency that manages funds nationally.
3. Visit your Mayor or Town Clerk to find whether there are any local funds to which you can apply.
4. Check out schemes supporting rural arts and community activity.

You may well be surprised and gratified at the possibilities – but it will help to have a clear statement of how the local community will benefit. Your Constitution will be vital here and also an outline Business Plan that describes how you intend to move your organisation forward with the funds. Ask around, in your committee and beyond, to find people with a track record of successful applications to funding agencies. There's a definite knack to it and you may need help to develop your in-house capability.

### **Start-up costs checklist**

- equipment (and insurance for it)
- print publicity (design, print and distribution)
- other publicity resources (news releases, parish magazines etc)
- tickets (if you have to produce them).
- contingency (losses from low attendance at initial shows etc)

### **Ongoing costs checklist**

- venue hire, projectionists etc
- publicity
- film hire/licence fee
- equipment insurance and public liability insurance
- BFFS membership (50% discount for start-ups)
- replacement projection bulbs etc
- contingency fund for equipment, etc

### **Sources of income**

- membership fees / box-office take
- other ticket income
- grants
- donations
- possible advertising (brochure, programme etc)
- sales of refreshments, raffles etc

## 10. Publicity and Marketing

It is vital to let your members know what's coming up, e.g., by sending regular newsletters, but for a CC whose audience includes members of the public, it is **essential** to broadcast your upcoming titles. If your films aren't well publicised people won't come to see them. An effective publicity campaign will include:

- a well-produced leaflet or flyer, widely-distributed among your members and placed in key areas such as libraries, shops, theatres, concert halls and at your venue
- attractive, informative and easy-to-read posters placed in libraries, community poster sites and at other venues (NB there are a number of possible designs that combine a brochure, programme and poster)
- free advertising and editorial in local papers and on radio stations (well-timed press releases are the key to this)
- inclusion in mailshots by your local arts development officers – you'll need to identify and cultivate these people
- creating your own website; or overcome cost and hassle by negotiating dedicated web pages on local organisation websites
- your venue may include your publicity in their mailings or even give you access to their mailing list.

Experience has shown that some of the best publicity is by word-of-mouth. Be shameless, brag about your new CC, tell all your friends, make sure everyone at work knows about it, and most importantly, make sure all committee members always carry some flyers, brochures and membership forms.

## 11. Hiring Films

Once you have an idea of the sort of titles you wish to screen and confirmed your venue dates the next stage is to check the availability of your chosen films and book them. If you are showing films on DVD or 35mm you can book these yourself, as most CCs do.

You may find it easier to enlist the help of a film booker if booking on 35mm, as some main distributors are reluctant to hire valuable prints to an organisation they don't deal with on a regular basis, but since that is exactly what you want to become it's best to grasp the nettle and just get on with it. If your venue is a cinema you may find they will book films for you or put you in touch with a film booker.

If you are projecting from DVD there are a number of sources of information to help you find a film. The BFFS webpage on sourcing films ([www.bffs.org.uk/services/sourcingfilms.html](http://www.bffs.org.uk/services/sourcingfilms.html)) is a great starting point and provides details for a large number of distributors. Following this you can then either contact each distributor by email or phone them – a phone call is often the best first approach.

BFFS operates a DVD hire scheme that provides an economical and hassle-free way to access a selection of new releases and classics from around the world. Details are available from:

[www.bffs.org.uk/services/blockbooking](http://www.bffs.org.uk/services/blockbooking)

### Legal Issues

Some of the things that you need to consider are:

- Does your venue have a premises licence? Are there any restrictions under the fire and building regulations? The venue and your local authority will be able to provide advice and assistance.
- Is your venue accessible to all, including people with disabilities? Advice and information on increasing the accessibility of your venue is available from: [www.yourlocalcinema.com](http://www.yourlocalcinema.com)

- Does your venue have public liability insurance, and does this cover your film screenings? Contact BFFS for details of a competitive insurance package to cover equipment and public liability insurance: [www.bffs.org.uk](http://www.bffs.org.uk)
- Does your venue have a performing rights licence to cover music? Advice and information is available from: [www.prsformusic.com](http://www.prsformusic.com)
- Do you have permission from the rights holder to screen your chosen films? Advice and information on how to identify rights holders and obtain screening licences is available from BFFS: [www.bffs.org.uk](http://www.bffs.org.uk).
- Have you made your viewers aware of the film's classification, if it has been classified? And if not, do you know how to obtain local classification? Classification must be clearly displayed on any publicity materials, including websites, programmes, posters, etc.

**All of these topics are covered in more detail in the BFFS Community Cinema Sourcebook.**

### **Conclusion**

We do of course wish you the best of luck in your endeavour but in our experience luck doesn't come into it. Sound common sense, teamwork, effective planning and making good use of the resources around you should see you through. We're there to support you, so don't hesitate to get in touch.

Contact BFFS:

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