

# CINEMA FOR ALL COMMUNITY CINEMA FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY

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Cinema For All held 3 focus groups throughout May and June 2020 to connect with community cinemas, look at how organisers and audiences have been affected by the Covid-19 crisis, and to understand when and how community cinemas can begin to reopen their doors.

44 participants attended via pre-scheduled Zoom sessions, representing 35 groups from all over the UK. Participants included younger organisers, older organisers, groups from cities and towns, groups from rural areas, family organisations and special interest groups. The focus groups were attended by both members of Cinema For All and non-member organisations, and ranged from groups screening in temporary/ rented venues to groups that screen almost daily in permanent venues.

## 1. Impact on organisers/ organisations

- Organisers reported seasons being cut short, festivals being cancelled and momentum being stalled. Most organisations cancelled their programmes two weeks before the official start of lockdown, following Cinema For All advice.
- Many reported quickly switching to online film screenings/ watch-alongs, with some using Cinema For All materials to guide them, and some creating their own 'how to' guides for their members.
- Groups reported being deeply concerned about audience and volunteer safety, and putting those concerns first when making any decisions.
- Some groups noted that their organisation had gone 'silent' during lockdown, however the majority had tried to keep up with some activity, including online screenings, Q+As and quizzes, with a few groups noting that they are meeting (virtually) as a committee more than ever.
- Some groups talked about more personal impacts of the crisis, such as volunteers being unwell, as well as de-motivation and anxiety.

*'The demotivation has been the hardest thing. We're a volunteer group - it's been really difficult to find a way through this, that makes sense. Film is great, but there are other potentially more important things that communities need.'*

## 2. Financial impact

- Some groups (around 40%) reported having savings/ surplus funds and therefore have the ability to weather closure for the foreseeable. These groups tended to be longer running organisations without many fixed costs, such as rent or utilities.
- Other groups (around 40%) reported that whilst they have no savings/ spare funds, suspending screenings for the foreseeable meant that they did not have any outgoings, due to the voluntary nature of their organisation. However, these groups were often very concerned for their parent venues, such as village halls, libraries, pubs and community centres, which have been hit by the crisis. Some indicated their own re-opening depending on the next steps of these venues.
- A smaller number of groups (around 20%) operate from their own venue, and are very concerned by their ability to re-open. Some reported having been granted rent rebates, support from the council and other grants, but indicated that those emergency funds would run out soon, especially with no clear view from the government on when and how cinema might start to reopen. Some reported having paid 12 months rent up front, and spoke about the impact that has on cash flow when no income is able to flow in.
- Positively, many groups commented that their audiences had been financially supportive - broadly not cancelling memberships or seeking refunds, though some of the more financially comfortable organisations have processed refunds regardless.

### 3. Reopening dates

- July/ August: no-one participating in the focus groups reported that they would open an indoor venue over the summer. Some groups are looking at outdoor screenings in July/ August, and some are exploring drive-ins though mostly in areas where lockdown restrictions are being relaxed at different rates (ie. Northern Ireland). Some groups voiced concerns about the practicalities of drive-in cinemas, and worried that audiences may be getting excited about something that is not easily achievable and is very expensive to run.
- September/ October : some groups reported looking at reopening in September/ October, though these tended to be organisers with generally younger audiences. Some were looking at shorter festival models, rather than reopening with a full programme.
- January 2021 : most participants (around 80%) reported wanting to wait until 2021 to fully open their doors. Some cited waiting for a possible Covid-19 vaccine, with some simply wanting to take the time to properly plan. Others noted using the time for the opportunity to rest and learn.
- A primary concern for all organisers was safety - of both audiences and fellow volunteers. Most wanted to wait until things look safer for members of the public, and until better advice was forthcoming from the government.

### 4. Safety and risk

- Around 50% of participants reported having public liability insurance for their organisation, the other groups relying on the public liability of host venues. Cinema For All strongly advises all groups to have their own public liability insurance, before re-opening and consulting with insurers on an extra activity such as outdoor screenings and catering.
- Many groups were very concerned about safety and hygiene, citing issues around seating, queuing, entering through narrow corridors, ventilation, PPE for volunteers and toilet cleaning. There was also concern about suspending catering and how this would affect incomes as well as increasing costs associated with acquiring PPE and possibly contacting external cleaners.

*‘There is no way we will put our volunteers at risk or expect them to wear masks and perform forensic cleaning.’*

### 5. Licence costs

- It was broadly agreed that licence costs are a huge outgoing for community cinemas and therefore a barrier to re-opening under social distancing guidances (ie. if cinemas reopen with customers seated 2m apart per household).
- There was much discussion about what distributors can do to help facilitate re-opening with regards to film licences, with discussions about reduced cost licences, or discounts for multiple screenings of the same film. All participants wanted to see some sort of relaxing of costs, or special offers from distributors, in order to get going again, else they felt they would be unable to screen films at all.
- Additionally, there were some concerns around availability of films due to the shortening of the theatrical window.

*‘Each film screening costs us around £250 (licence, venue etc). Cost of licences is one thing, but availability is another. Lots of films that would have gone to cinemas are now going straight to streaming. What happens to the ‘theatrical window’? When are titles going to be available to us?’*

### 6. Social considerations

- All groups reporting staying in touch electronically with audiences and members, though some noted that engagement with communications is starting to wane.
- Around 50% participants reported holding online film club screenings or watch parties to keep audience engagement and to keep screening films. Most of the content screened was free content already available through streaming platforms, though one group has set up their own platform streaming content from short / local filmmakers.

- Organisers reported staying in touch with each other using social media, many citing the UK Film Societies Facebook page as a place of knowledge sharing and support.
- Many also reported using social media to stay in touch with their own audiences, using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter more frequently to keep audience members engaged with quizzes, film discussions and resource sharing.
- Others reported social media engagement to be low and disappointing - instead preferring to stay in touch through email newsletters containing streaming recommendations. .

*'As good as these virtual activities are, they do always lack the social aspect of going out together.'*

- Some groups were very mindful that their audience is not as online as others, and have been doing more in person activities (though safely), such as DVD drop off services for vulnerable and isolated people, seed swaps and decorating their venue to show support for the NHS and key workers.

*'We need to do something about the people who don't have access to digital streaming services. It's brought home to us the plight of the disadvantaged and the need for a digital revolution.'*

- There was also a lot of discussion about the benefit of digital screenings, such as increasing participation from guest speakers and filmmakers, as well as the fact that free content makes it more accessible to a wider range of audience members.

*'At the moment we're just including films that are free to watch online to avoid making people pay for services.'*

## **7. Audience confidence**

- A small number of groups (less than 10%) had already conducted audience surveys to understand feelings surrounding returning to public screenings, though most wanted to wait until more firm advice on social distances and PPE was available from the government.

*'Some of our audience say they feel safer going to a community cinema where people know and respect each other, rather than a multiplex and not knowing how it's going to be organised.'*

- There was some discussion around communication and the difficulty of persuading audiences to leave their homes to see films again, after so long watching in solitary spaces. Audience surveys could cover asking what might persuade them to leave the house again, both in terms of safety, cost and film appeal. There was some discussion about the use of paper advertising materials and if this presented a hygiene issue.
- There was much valuable discussion around socially distanced cinema not excluding audience members. A popular solution raised by participants suggested simultaneously streaming films digitally, so that people at home who were unable to secure tickets could still participate.

*'I feel a mixture of excitement as well as disappointment. It is an opportunity to do things differently.'*

- Finally, each group was asked about their feelings on potentially increasing their ticket prices. The current average cost of the community cinema ticket is £6.04. Almost all participants strongly responded that this was not an option, and affordable ticket prices was what set them apart from larger, commercial screens, and made them accessible to their audiences. A small number (less than 10%) of participants felt they might not have a choice, though it would be done with much reluctance.

## **8. Next steps - what can Cinema For All do?**

Following the focus groups and the sharing of this summary document, Cinema For All will be advocating for the community cinema sector with partners, distributors, funders and more. Below are some initial next steps, some which are already in progress, and some which may take a little longer to achieve:

- We will lobby partners and distributors to look at cost effective, more flexible options for screening licences.
- We will look at cost effective solutions for our own services when they begin to operate again.
- We will advise and support organisations to risk assess their reopening plans and apply templates to their own venues.
- We will lobby the BFI and FAN to make sure community cinema concerns are included in any advice or next steps taken.
- We will help signpost organisations to information on funding sources and share advice on how to effectively fundraise.
- We will organise more online networking options for volunteer-led cinemas whilst we are in lockdown.
- We will recognise the devolved countries of the UK in any advice we give.

For more resources, guidance and advice from Cinema For All, subscribe to newsreel:

<https://cinemaforall.org.uk/news/>

Cinema For All June 2020

\*Quotes used in this document are with permission and anonymised and maybe be paraphrased for clarity.