

Rural cinemas - three different approaches

THE CHALLENGE

The desire to bring the big screen to small communities can be fulfilled in several ways, as three Gloucestershire market towns have shown.

People living in Wotton-under-Edge had long enjoyed having their own privately-run cinema and were left disappointed and angry when it closed in 2002, leaving them with a 12-mile journey to see the latest films. Those who relied on public transport found themselves with a particular problem in that they had to leave before the end of a showing to catch their bus.

Reports in the press that blamed the closure of the cinema on poor support caused feeling in the town to run high and a public meeting was called to see if it could be re-opened.

It became apparent, however, that without another private operator looking to take it on, the only way the cinema could be re-opened would be as a community-run venture.

While in **Newent**, although residents were used to travelling the half an hour drive to nearby Gloucester to see the movie blockbusters, many hankered after the days when the town had its own picture house where customers could watch some of the best examples of world cinema.

Meanwhile, a number of people living in **Winchcombe**, particularly the young and those without their own cars, were unable to enjoy the latest releases because they cannot get to Cheltenham in the evenings due to a lack of effective public transport.





DEVELOPING THE IDEA

...in Wotton

Two public meetings called to discuss the future of Wotton's cinema resulted in the decision by a group of townsfolk to pursue the idea of re-opening it themselves.

Once the group had taken on the premises it became apparent that the venue was in a poor state of repair and would need to be completely refurbished and modernised if it was to attract the audiences it needed to be profitable.

The cinema itself was housed in a building owned by Wotton Boxing Club and the group worked closely with the club's trustees from the start of the project.

The project was placed under the umbrella of the **Wotton Recreational Trust** (WRT), an organisation created by **Wotton-under-Edge Town Council** that enjoyed charitable status. A vital element of the cinema plan was that it would put money back into the town, through WRT, once it was in profit.

The cinema group formed a committee which put together a mission statement and a business plan.

After two years the project group became a **co-operative** with a management committee to run the cinema and a fundraising committee to support it.

The project is underpinned by some 80 **shareholders** who, for a £10 stake in the cinema, have a say in the way it is run.

...in Newent

Newent had previously had its own weekly cinema which had been run by the Newent Arts Society at the former Newent Centre during the 1970s and 1980s.

A nostalgic conversation between two people who had been involved in the venture led to a successful application for grant funding from the Lottery-supported **UK Film Council**, which at the time was offering money to groups interested in setting up film societies.

The new Newent Film Society (NFS) shared its plans with the **Newent Initiative Trust**, an organisation that supports schemes that benefit the town, and sought technical advice and costings from Gloucester-based Audio Visual Services.

...in Winchcombe

The idea of launching a rural cinema at the Abbey Fields Community Centre in Winchcombe answered two needs: it enabled local people to see the latest films in their own town and it created a new funding stream for the new community centre which had been created within a former school.

The management committee of the Abbey Fields Community Centre worked with the town council to draw up a business plan for the centre which included the cinema idea.

Members were further enthused after attending meetings of the Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum where they heard about the success of schemes in Wotton and Newent.

They contacted the **British Federation of Film Societies** for advice and visited the rural cinema at Newent to look at their new facilities. On the advice of Newent, they also sought specialist technical advice and costings from **Audio Visual Services** of Gloucester.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

...in Wotton

The cost of creating a modern, digital cinema for Wotton came to more than £160,000.

It was decided early on to install digital equipment as showing 35mm films was a laborious process, which would almost certainly deter many volunteers, and technology was moving at such a rate that the 35mm format was likely to become obsolete in a short space of time.

Other expenses included the cost of installing new toilets, disabled access, air conditioning and central heating and improved box office facilities along with a new screen and seats.

Initially it was hoped that the scheme would attract money set aside for historic cinemas by the National Lottery but supporters had to go back to the drawing board when it became apparent that, despite being used as a picture house since 1913, Wotton's cinema failed to meet funding criteria because it had not been purpose-built.

Instead, committee members had to spread their net much wider to raise the money they needed:

Fundraising events/initiatives have collected £160,000 in the space of two years in a town that has a population of 6,000. These have included:

- Several sales of second hand videos and cassettes. The first of these events raised almost £2,500.
- Quiz nights.
- An Italian supper.

- Seat sponsorship – all 100 seats were sponsored for £100 each.
- An annual themed calendar, sponsored by local businesses or organisations such as the **Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum** in 2007.

Spin offs from these fundraising events have been that they have generated awareness of the cinema and attracted further volunteers.

A number of applications have been made for **grants**: Money raised in this way includes:

- £15,000 from the **Gloucestershire Rural Renaissance** scheme's Small Project Investment Fund, managed by **Gloucestershire First**. This scheme awards grants to projects that can be shown to benefit the local economy.
- £32,000 from **Stroud District Council**.
- £35,000 from **Gloucestershire Environmental Trust** (the organisation that administers landfill taxes).
- £3,000 from the **Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum** Development Fund.
- £6,000 from **Wotton-under-Edge Town Council** to buy a projector. The council undertook to provide the money under the condition that the projector remained under its ownership and could be re-sold should the cinema project fail.
- £3,000 from local charity the **Summerfield Trust** to pay for a screen.
- £5,000 under the Lottery's **Awards for All** scheme.
- Around £1,000 from the **Mid Counties Co-op**.

Subsidies have also been used to good effect in Wotton:

- Local company **Renishaw** has donated £5,000 to EPH and has worked with the cinema to set up a subsidised scheme for its employees that allows them a £1 discount on tickets.
- **Gloucestershire County Council** is subsidising a Thursday afternoon matinee for senior citizens and Sunday matinee for families.

EPH successfully applied for one of 250 state-of-the-art projectors under a scheme being run by the **British Film Council** (BFC). The machine is worth £80,000 but EPH has to raise £23,000 to refurbish the old projector room and fit secure doors to comply with conditions laid down by the BFC.

Other forms of aid for Wotton's cinema project included manual help in the shape of work parties from the nearby **HM Leyhill Open Prison**. Working parties, headed by a supervisor from the prison, spent several weeks decorating the building both inside and out. Several young people pursuing Duke of Edinburgh's awards have also helped out at EPH.



A number of volunteers formed working parties to carry out some aspects of the work to modernise and refurbish the cinema, although professionals such as builders, plumbers and electricians were brought in to carry out certain tasks. The work was overseen by a volunteer project manager.

The cinema, which opened as The Electric Picture House in November 2005, is run almost entirely by volunteers, overseen by a board of trustees.

The volunteers have been recruited through a variety of ways, including appeals in local newspapers and newsletters, posters around the town and street promotion mornings.

The only paid member of staff is a person who has the labour intensive job of drawing up a roster of the 90 or so volunteers who help with the day-to-day running of the cinema.

The volunteers who put on films for the public are trained to carry out specific jobs and include several who are able to operate the projection equipment. They are headed by supervisors who are responsible for all aspects of the cinema while it is open.

EPH puts on six shows every weekend, a special programme during school holidays and fundraising events on Tuesday nights. Its seat average is 30% which is 10% more than that enjoyed by most multiplexes.

EPH has won a regional award from the Market and Coastal Towns Association and represented the South West in the national final.

...in Newent

After its success in winning a grant from the UK Film Council, the Newent Film Society set about finding a suitable venue for its screenings.

Newent School was discounted because its hall was felt to be too big and the group finally plumped for the town's memorial hall which was felt to have a more intimate atmosphere.

The film society then set about finding equipment, including a screen and projector, that could be easily carried in and out of the hall using the £2,500 it had been awarded by the UK Film Council and a further £1,000 from the Newent Initiative Trust. The equipment is stored at a private house when it is not being used.

The group decided to follow the film society route, which involves film-goers signing up on a membership basis. The reasons for this included:

- The requirements of the original grant from the UK Film Council.
- The convenience of belonging to a film society rather than running a public cinema.
- Distribution rights are cheaper for film societies than for public cinemas.
- Members sign up for an up front fee, rather than paying on the door, which qualifies them to all the films on the society's programme.



Newent Film Society showed its first movies at the beginning of 2005. It specialises in "world films" rather than the latest Hollywood blockbusters which are already provided by Gloucester's multi-plex. NFS is a member of the British Federation of Film Societies.

...in Winchcombe

The management committee of Winchcombe's Abbeyfields Community Centre launched its rural cinema in the Autumn of 2006. Funding for the project included £3,000 from the **Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum** to fund a projector and screen and £2,000 from **Winchcombe Town Council** for the installation of a sound system.

The community centre runs monthly showings of movie blockbusters to the public on Saturdays and runs a film society on a week day which specialises in mostly non-American productions. Members of the society sign up for six monthly intervals but pay a smaller entry fee than those for the weekend blockbuster showings.

The management committee is working with local couple Rob and Clare Small who deal with the hire of films, marketing, publicity and the operation of the equipment. The plan is for Mr and Mrs Small to be paid once the project has been up and running for some time.

Those behind the Winchcombe cinema project were left with a potential headache after it emerged that sound proofing at the community centre needed to be improved so that neighbours were not bothered by noise generated from showings. **Tewkesbury Borough Council** helped the community centre to meet the cost of this work by providing money set aside for the benefit of the community as a result of a Section 106 agreement drawn up for a new housing development. An additional benefit of the soundproofing measures has been improved insulation resulting in reduced heat loss.

KEEPING IT GOING

...in Wotton

The volunteers who run the Electric Picture House are constantly looking at ways in which the cinema can be used to generate money and/or give something back to the town. Its slogan is: "Wotton Cinema – Working for Wotton."

Revenue raised by ticket sales has not as yet reached the level that enables it to cover all of the cinema's running costs, which means EPH need to come up with innovative ways to fund the difference.

The launch of the cinema project co-incided with the start of **Under the Edge Arts** and the two organisations have subsequently worked together. The cinema showed films based on classic books during a literature festival organised by Under the Edge. The cinema has also joined forces with the Wotton Heritage Centre to share the profits of a slideshow held at EPH.



The cinema's stage can be used for poetry readings or classical music events and the venue has been hired out to local companies wishing to hold power point presentations or groups for their annual general meetings.

Regular themed nights, such as Bollywood, Valentine's or Priscilla, Queen of the Desert evenings, have proved to be excellent fundraisers.

While seat averages at EPH are higher than those enjoyed by the multi-plexes, the cinema hopes to build on its numbers to achieve a 40% average.

Future plans include:

- Using the stage area to develop a venue for live music events.
- Exploring the idea of running adverts for local businesses before films.
- Offering NVQ experience in conjunction with local colleges.
- Offering facilities for film makers. EPH is working with Stroud College and the University of Gloucestershire to provide a venue for students who have made short films. EPH is also exploring funding to work with Under the Edge Arts to enable young people to create short films.
- Employing a manager to run the venue.
- Setting up a club for X-Box Play Station enthusiasts to enable them to play using a big screen.

...in Newent

Newent Film Society hopes to find a more permanent site for its activities, with a built-in screen and other equipment on site to reduce the amount of work put in by those members who have to set up the cinema before films can be shown.

Talks are also taking place over the possibility of showing a few more films of a "more popular" nature to draw in more audiences in the hope that this would subsidise the less popular movies. However, this move could result in the group having to sever its film society ties.

...in Winchcombe

Winchcombe plans to build on the showings offered by its rural cinema to benefit specific groups within the community. Its plans include:

- A club showing children's films during school holidays with the hoped for spin off of reducing anti-social behaviour.
- Special showings of vintage films for elderly members of the Winchcombe Day Centre.

TOP TIPS

- **Get passionate people involved:** Wotton's cinema group was spearheaded by a dedicated film buff who made it his business to keep up-to-date with all of the latest developments in cinema technology.
- **Scour the net for potential grants:** Look carefully at the criteria set down by grants organisations to see if your project qualifies.
- **Accept any expert help that is offered:** Help and advice from a specialist officer from Stroud District Council has proved invaluable in terms of filling out grant forms and learning the right jargon to use to secure funding. A representative of Co-operative Futures UK visits the cinema regularly to check how it is doing and to give free advice. Co-operative Futures is a co-operative policy and development agency supporting the development of social enterprises in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Swindon and Wiltshire.
- **Be prepared for the long haul:** It took three years to raise the money to refurbish and re-open the Electric Picture House.
- **Work with other local organisations:** The Electric Picture House has reaped the benefits from forging links with other groups in Wotton, such as Under the Edge Arts.
- **Think laterally:** Help does not have to be financial. Wotton's cinema group saved hundreds of pounds on decorating costs by enlisting the help of inmates from a local open prison. Negotiations are currently underway with a view to using the assistance of offenders under schemes operated by the probation service.
- **Encourage a sense of community ownership:** Instil the feeling among audiences that the cinema belongs to them. In Wotton audiences are welcomed to the EPH before shows, told about shows that are coming up and given details of forthcoming fundraising events.
- **Ensure you have wide support:** Wotton's cinema has always been run with the consensus of the wider community. Shareholders ensure that the direction of the cinema is not determined by a small committee of people.
- **Say thank you!** Regular volunteer appreciation nights are held at the Electric Picture House in honour of the army of volunteers who help to run it. During these events the volunteers are able to find out how the cinema is doing and pass on feedback.
- **Know your volunteers:** Surveys of volunteers can result in the identification of useful skills such as human resources or accountancy experience.
- **Delegate:** Create sub committees to concentrate on various aspects of running a community cinema, such as marketing, applying for grants and fundraising. It is important to ensure that no individuals are given too much to do.
- **Support local businesses:** Buying goods or services from local businesses generates goodwill and can result in a two-way exchange of support. EPH sources its sweets from a local shop.

- **Advertise:** Use all means possible, such as web sites, recorded telephone messages, the local press and newsletters, to let the public know about films being shown and fundraising events.
- **Don't buy new if you don't have to:** EPH acquired a photocopier after using a local newsletter to appeal to companies who might have a machine that they no longer needed.
- **Be dynamic:** Think of an apt name for your project and the people involved with it. For example, volunteers at the Electric Picture House are known as "Team Electric".
- **Make it fun!** Keeping everybody friendly and happy means people stay on board and a project grows. In addition, the sight of volunteers having fun rubs off onto customers.
- **Be security conscious:** Security at EPH is very tight to safeguard the investment made in terms of equipment. There are also strict procedures in place in terms of handling money.
- **Publicity, publicity:** Tell the world what films you are showing through recorded messages, e-newsletters, notices in shops, articles in local newspapers and websites.
- **More the merrier:** The "film society" model relies on having a number of people prepared to get involved in helping to set up the equipment.
- **Use specialist retailers:** Both Newent and Winchcombe used a specialist company which was able to sell the right equipment for their particular requirements.
- **Liaise with the local authority from an early stage:** Those behind the Abbeyfields community cinema were left with a potential headache after it emerged that improved sound proofing was needed to keep the neighbours happy. Liaising with the local authority means that any potential issues, such as sound proofing and fire regulations, that might affect a licence are identified at an early stage.
- **Learn from others:** Winchcombe gleaned invaluable information after visiting the rural cinema already up and running in Newent and talking to representatives from Wotton about the community cinema there.
- **Make the most of popular films:** Winchcombe has discovered that it is almost impossible to judge the films that will be sell outs, not withstanding the number of Oscars they have gathered. The community centre has made the most of particularly popular movies by arranging additional matinee showings the day after the main show.



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'Rural cinemas - three different approaches' is one in a series of case studies, sponsored by the Market and Coastal Towns Association. each spotlighting an issue or challenge faced by a GMTF member town.

Each case study presents:

- the **initial challenge** or issue faced by the town
- how a **solution** was developed
- how it was **rolled out**
- how it is being **sustained**
- **top tips** – useful information and advice to other communities which may be facing similar issues
- **contact details** to help you find out more

