

Now Showing!

Start your own community cinema in Scotland

Welcome!

Scotland has a rich cinema history and is home to award-winning community cinemas from Ayr Film Society to Skye Community Cinema. Why not be part of its exciting future by starting up your own community cinema!

This guide will provide the key information you need to start your community cinema in Scotland, as well as show you where you can find further support and learn ways to make your screenings shine.

Whether you are a film fan or completely new to film exhibition, this guide will help you each step of the way, from determining which licences and insurances you need to screen films safely and legally, to creating your vision and connecting with your audiences.

It also features a handy checklist at the end so you can easily track your progress and break the information down into simple steps in a way that works for you. We've also signposted organisations that can support you along the way!

The guide has been created based on the original Now Showing Guide jointly commissioned by Film Hub Scotland, Cinema For All, Regional Screen Scotland and Creative Scotland.



Though Cinema For All's advice is based on extensive research, decades of experience and our partnership and advocacy work, it does not constitute legal advice, and we are not responsible for the actions you take in your own organisations.

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Getting started with your cinema

1. Form a team

There are lots of different roles and skills involved in running a community cinema. Some roles can be done by one person and others benefit from being shared by a small group of people. You can build roles and job titles as you see fit, but here are the main ones below:

- **Programmer** – Chooses and books the films (you can choose the films you want to screen with your group or even with your audience, but usually one person on the team books the film licence).
- **Projectionist** – Sets up and oversees the projection of the film (more information on Equipment can be found on page 7).
- **Marketing team** – Designs graphics for printed and/or digital posters and programmes, writes copy, handles social media and distributing any printed flyers.
- **Treasurer** – Keeps track of finances, accounting and banking.
- **Front of House** – Greets the audience, sells refreshments, sets up the room, checks tickets etc.

Communication

Decide how you will keep in contact with your team, for example, having monthly meetings online or in-person, chatting via email to organise tasks or using an online workspace such as [Slack](#).

Recruiting and managing volunteers

Are there any friends or family members that could help you with your screenings? You could also do a call-out or contact volunteer centres such as [Volunteer Scotland](#) and [Creative Lives](#). Cinema For All have created a useful guide to working with volunteers in a community cinema setting, available on the [Regional Screen Scotland's website](#).

Please note: If you are working with under 18s or vulnerable adults, you will need other paperwork, such as safeguarding policies and potentially a DBS check for all volunteers.

2. Decide on a name and logo for your team

When choosing a name for your community cinema, you want to make it clear what it is, where it is and what you do. You can still have fun creating a name and even use a tagline underneath it to explain a little bit more about your cinema.

For example, [Screen Party](#) in Portobello, Edinburgh, have used the word 'screen' to indicate film screenings and included a film reel in their logo. By including Party in their name, they are placing their cinema in a specific location, so audiences know where they are based.



3. Get licences and insurances

There are a few licences and insurances that you need to have in place to ensure you are screening films safely and legally.

If these processes are new to you, don't worry - read through the details below and tick them off as you complete them. Remember that you can contact Film Hub Scotland or Cinema For All if you have any questions.

Please note: There are some licences and insurances that your venue needs to have

as well. These are detailed in a helpful checklist in the Venue section, on page 5, so you can easily check if your potential venue has everything in place to run screenings there.

Public Liability Insurance

This is an insurance you need to have as an organisation to legally protect you, your audience and volunteers. It is best to not rely on the Public Liability Insurance of your venue, as their policies might not cover all of your activity, or you might use different venues for each screening. The cost of the insurance depends on various factors, such as the size of your venue and who you are working with, for example under 18s.

- How long does it last? Policies typically last a year and can be paid monthly or annually.

Cinema Licence

Community cinemas based in Scotland will need to take into consideration The Cinemas Act 1985, which states that any venue showing films will need to apply for a Cinema Licence. This can be obtained from your local Council.

Exemptions from the Cinema Licence are offered in two cases:

1. If you are a non-for-profit group.
2. If you are delivering occasional and exceptional exhibitions where the premises are used on no more than six days in the calendar year — provided the owner gives the council, the Fire Authority and the Chief Officer of Police no less than seven days' written notice.

You can apply to the Scottish Government for an exemption certificate. To find out more and download the exemption form, [visit Regional Screen Scotland's website](#).

- How long does it last? A Cinema Licence lasts for a year, but for not-for-profit groups you can apply for an exemption certificate.

Film Licence

You always need a film licence from the distributor of the film in order to screen it. A distributor is a company or a person that owns the copyright to a film and can grant legal permission for the film to be screened.

For community cinemas, most film licences cost between £97 - £140 per screening. If you are interested in screening films that have recently been shown at a film festival, this would be classed as a premiere screening, which can cost up to £500.

The type of licence you need is called a **Commercial Single Title Screening Licence (non-theatrical)**. This licence allows you to advertise the film publicly, charge for tickets or accept donations, and is the most commonly used licence.

- **How long does it last?** You need to apply for a licence from the distributor of the film you want to screen every time you screen it. The licence is valid only for a single screening of the film. Please note that you still require a licence even if you don't plan on charging for tickets.

Tip: If you are struggling to locate the licence-holder for a film you are trying to screen, you can seek advice from **Cinema For All** or **Film Hub Scotland**. See a list of major film distributors listed in the film programming section (page 8) to help you get started.

4. Find a venue for your screenings

Choosing a venue is an important step, as you want to make sure it is appropriate for film screenings and accessible for your audiences.

We have created a handy checklist below to help you check if the venue you are considering has everything you need for your screenings.

Lots of community cinemas screen in different types of venues, such as:

- **Community centre**
- **Village halls**
- **Function rooms in bars, pubs and restaurants**
- **Arts centres**
- **Local charity or community group venues.**

Venue Checklist

- **Premises Licence -** Most public venues will already have a Premises Licence; if not, they would need to apply for one from their local council. This is an annual licence, and the cost depends on the activities and footfall of the venue.

- **Cinema Licence** - Remember to check if your venue has this, or apply for the Cinema Licence exemption from your local council. For more details and a link to Regional Screen Scotland's helpful guide on getting the exemption for this licence, see page 6.
- **Music Licence (from PRS for Music or PPL)** - This licence covers you for music in your chosen film, plus any additional music (recorded or live) you might want to play as the audience are entering or leaving your screening. Depending on how the screening is operated, there are two Music Licence options:

1. Entertainments & Attractions Music Licence
2. Charity Event Music Licence

Most venues that run public events have this licence already, but it's best to double check!

- **Capacity** - How many people can be seated inside comfortably? Is there a sufficient number of fire exits? Would everyone be able to see the screen easily and read any subtitles? The gap between the screen and the front row is determined by the projector's position, and you should take wheelchair access into account. Capacity also informs how many tickets you might sell, which helps you understand your costs and potential income from your screening to cover costs and fund future events.
- **Comfort and Accessibility** - Does your venue have chairs, and are they comfy? Is the venue accessible to Deaf and Disabled people? Can the audience purchase snacks and refreshments? Are facilities accessible to all? For example, accessible toilets, disabled car parking spots. Consider the temperature: is the space warm enough? If not, be sure to encourage your audience to wrap up warm.
- **Sight and sound** - If your venue has large windows and skylights, check whether you have large curtains or blinds to cover them to block out external light. What are the acoustics like in the space? Test it with a clap - if there is an echo, can you help soften it with soft furnishings such as carpets, mats and curtains? Filling the room with an audience helps too!
- **Venue Hire Costs** - Is the venue hire affordable? Sometimes, a higher venue hire fee is cost-effective because it may come with free use of screening equipment or staff and marketing support. We recommend looking at community venues first, as they can often be free or more affordable, and as a community cinema you might connect with their aims. Perhaps a bar or a restaurant could offer you their venue

for free in exchange for keeping any money made from refreshments.

5. Get screening equipment

Whether you are already technically skilled or a complete newcomer, setting up and using screening equipment is a learnable skill.

To help keep things simple, below we have listed the main equipment needed to screen films:

Projector

Ideally your projector would have between 2000-5000 ANSI lumens (this is how bright the projector is) and is full HD (1080p) to ensure a clear picture. Ensure that your projector has a 16:9 aspect ratio. This is the shape of the projected image on screen, and most films are made with this aspect ratio, with the image filling the entire screen.

Screen

The projector's light bounces off the screen and produces a clear, cinematic image. As with the projector, you want your screen to have a 16:9 aspect ratio. Aim for a 3-metre size screen (this is measured diagonally); some screens can be fixed permanently, or you can also get portable screens with detachable legs to adjust the height.

PA System

This offers great sound at your screenings and includes a left and right speaker, cables and an amplifier (with a control panel to adjust the volume). A PA System is also useful for live music or plugging in microphones for introductions and Q&As you might want to do at your screening.

Player

You can screen films from DVD, BluRay players or laptops, and any of these devices will plug into your projector via an HDMI cable. BluRay offers great sound and picture quality.

If your screening equipment is not permanently fixed in the venue, you may want to consider a shelving trolley where you can rest the projector and amplifier and safely secure any cables during your screening.

If you would like to learn more about screening equipment and grow your confidence about this further, you can read more in [Cinema For All's Equipment Guide](#) or Film Hub Scotland's comprehensive Tech and Projection Toolkit, released May 2026 (visit [Film Hub Scotland](#) for details).

Some questions to consider when organising equipment for your screening:

- Does your venue already have some equipment that you can use? Someone with experience of live music can be really helpful.
- Is the equipment permanently installed, or do you need to plan time to set it up?
- If you own equipment, remember to purchase equipment insurance to protect against damage, loss or theft. Your insurer will require you to have safe storage.
- If you do not have any equipment in your venue, can you borrow or hire some from another organisation, venue or group nearby? You can check [Cinema for All's equipment hire scheme](#), as they have kits in Jedburgh, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.
- Be sure to test your equipment with your team before your screening, so you can check the quality and also feel more comfortable using it.
- If you have a local hub such as [Driftwood Cinema](#), [NEAT](#) or [Iris Arts](#) - perhaps you can get in touch with them about hiring equipment?

6. Choose your first film

Film programming is carefully considering the films you would like to screen for your audiences, as well as booking the licence for each screening.

When choosing your film, think about what you want to achieve with your screenings and your target audience. You may want to reach out to a part of your community that is currently underserved, under-represented or who could benefit the most from a shared space.

Things to consider:

- **Research:** You could research and ask your communities what genres of films they enjoy the most to help you narrow down your choice. Some community cinemas select three films they know are available from a distributor and ask their audience to vote on which one they would like to see. Connecting with different parts of your community and forming partnerships can help further your reach; consider speaking with a local LGBTQ+ hub, dementia support groups, autism support groups, youth groups, refugee associations, and other local groups or charities.

- **Welcoming:** When thinking about programming your first film, it can be helpful to choose something that speaks to what your cinema is about and is also welcoming for your audience. Some good questions to ask as a group are: Who do we want to attract to our screenings? Is this different from what other nearby cinemas are screening at the moment? How would we like our audience to feel when attending our cinema?
- **Confidence:** Choose a film you are passionate about, as this helps your confidence when it comes to marketing your screening. Seeing the film beforehand will help make marketing your screenings easier and more engaging. Tip: If you are a member of your local Film Hub, you can access online film previews from The Screening Room, hosted by Film Hub Wales. [Visit the website.](#)

Is your chosen film available to book?

No matter what kind of film screening you plan to run (whether it's free or you're charging for tickets), if you are going to show a film to an audience, you must apply and pay for a film licence from the film distributor who owns the rights. This is called "booking" the film. Note that the film licence is separate from the venue licences detailed on pages 5 & 6.

For the vast majority of films made by major film studios, there are some great film booking services working on behalf of distributors to offer access to films.

- **Cinema For All:** requires you to be a member for their tried and tested selection of international, independent and documentary films. Licences cost £97 flat fee.
- **Filmbankmedia:** requires a £150 deposit to join and has the widest range of Hollywood studio films. Licence fee depends on the size of your audience, starting at £89+VAT or 35% of your total box office. Bear in mind that some films can be temporarily taken off the catalogue due to cinematic re-releases or added to a special permissions list, and requests for these titles may take longer.
- **MPLC:** represents titles from major studios such as 20th Century Studios, and you need to be a Cinema For All member to book films from their catalogue. Licences cost £90+VAT.
- **BFI (British Film Institute):** has a range of British, international and independent films.
- **Moviola:** has a smaller selection than Filmbank and MPLC but could have that little gem you're looking for.

When are films available?

For new films in their 'theatrical release' (meaning they are currently at the cinema) there is usually a 4–6 week window before it is available 'non-theatrically' (for community cinemas to book and screen).

What if I can't find the licence for the film I want to screen?

It's worth noting that not all films are available to book. The rights owners to some films can be lost or can take time to track down. If you need assistance tracking down a film licence, [Film Hub Scotland](#) or [Cinema For All](#) can help you.

You can sometimes go directly to filmmakers, especially for more independent titles (if they are the licence holder of the film), or use other helpful, direct connections to representatives of undistributed films through [FestivalScope Pro](#).

Booking the film licence

Once you have the date you want to screen your film and the venue, you can book the licence for the film. Give yourself at least a four-week window to advertise your screening after you have booked your film. Do not advertise your film screening until you have confirmation of the film licence for your screening from the licence holder.

7. Consider accessibility and inclusion

When creating any kind of event, you want to make it as accessible as possible so your screenings can be an enjoyable experience for your audiences as well as for you and your volunteers. There are lots of ways you can make your screenings accessible, both big and small. We've listed some tips below in each area of your cinema that could help you increase accessibility. You might also want to explore running a Relaxed Screening, designed for people who prefer a less intense cinema experience, for example neurodivergent people or people living with dementia.

For a list of places for a wide range of access tips you could explore the [BFI Directory](#).

Venue

This is one of the biggest areas affecting your event's accessibility. To ensure your venue is as accessible as possible, consider choosing a venue that has wheelchair access, disabled toilets, a hearing loop in the screening room (this helps people wearing hearing aids to better hear the sound), quiet breakout spaces, parking and good transport links.

Pricing

From tickets to refreshments, you can make your screenings financially accessible, for example: creating various ticket options such as, family tickets, pensioners tickets, or offering pay as you feel tickets.

Equipment

You can screen your films with Descriptive Subtitles (these offer subtitles for dialogue as well as descriptions of diegetic sounds, such as ‘phone ringing’, ‘hurried footsteps’) or subtitles (dialogue only). Descriptive Subtitles are the most accessible, as they help make the screening accessible for Deaf and Hard of Hearing and neurodivergent audience members, as well as non-native English-speaking audiences.

Marketing

Make sure your posters and flyers use at least font size 12 and that the text contrasts to the background colour. Be sure to highlight any accessibility offers from your venue or screening by including the hearing loop logo or stating that ‘subtitles will be available’. You could also include a photo of the inside or outside of your venue on social media. This can be helpful for those that have not visited the venue before to feel more comfortable and know what to expect. For more tips on making your marketing accessible, see [Cinema For All’s Accessible Marketing Guide](#).

8. Promote your screening

Once you have booked your first film and venue, it’s time to start promoting your screening! Aim to give you and your team 4-6 weeks before your screening date to publicise your screening. Here are some tips to help promote your screenings and grow your audience:

Design an eye-catching poster

This can be used digitally on your social media, newsletters and website. Print versions (such as posters and flyers) can be placed around your local area. [Canva](#) offers an easy way to design posters for free. To ensure your marketing is accessible, remember to use a minimum of size 12pt font, contrasting colours, such as, dark blue text on a cream background. Include other important information, such as the age certification of the film, venue details, start time and price. If your film has something extra, for example, an introduction or a sing-along, this could also be good to include.

Set up a social media account that feels right for your audience and that you feel comfortable with

You can make your posts stand out with engagement opportunities (a competition for free tickets, countdown to the screening or a 'guess the film' game).

Send an informative and visual mailout

You could use websites like [Mailchimp](#) to set up a mailing list (free for up to 500 subscribers). This is compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as people can sign up and unsubscribe themselves at any time. In your newsletter, you could include the trailer for the film, a link to your website or to your ticket page. You could set up a newsletter sign-up sheet at your first screening.

Create a list of places to distribute your marketing (print or digital)

- Your own organisation's outlets (if existing) will help reach the people you are already in contact with, making them aware that you are now screening films.
- Chat to local organisations and businesses where you could put up your poster or leave some flyers, (local post office, cafes, libraries).
- Consider local press and publications such as local newspapers, noticeboards, and other organisations' newsletters to help spread the word.

The logo that you have designed for your cinema can be used across all your marketing to help build awareness of your cinema and branding.

Tip: you can set up an online profile on the [My Community Cinema](#) website (an online space for community cinemas to promote their screenings and share peer-to-peer resources) for free.

Summary Checklist:

Now that you have read through each step of setting up your community cinema, you can use this handy checklist to track your progress.

1. Form a team

- What assistance would you like with your cinema? Are there particular roles you need help with?

- If you don't have a team yet, could you do a call-out for volunteers or contact your local volunteer centre to advertise opportunities?

2. Decide on a name and potential logo for your community cinema

- This allows you to start creating an online presence (via social media or a website), and you will also need an organisation name for arranging licences and insurances needed to screen films.

As a volunteer and not-for-profit organisation, it can be beneficial to have a written constitution for your community cinema. This is a simple one or two-page document that states your organisation's aims and purpose: for example, to screen films to your community. This can also be useful for opening a bank account for your cinema and applying for funding. Contact [Cinema For All](#) for a template to help you get started.

3. Licences and insurances your community cinema needs

- Research and obtain Public Liability Insurance for your community cinema.
- Cinema Licence Exemption applied for - use the [RSS handy template](#) to do this.
- Book a film licence from the distributor of the film once you have the venue and screening date.

4. Choose a venue for your screenings

- Find a venue to host your screenings. (Tip: a 30+ seat capacity is helpful for covering your costs through ticket sales).
- Check the sound and acoustics of the room as well as blackout capabilities of any windows.
- Is it accessible for you and your audience?
- Does it have screening equipment? Have you tested it?
- Check it has a PRSForMusic licence/PPL licence to cover music you may play and the music in the film.
- Check whether the venue has a Premises Licence.

5. Get screening equipment

- Do you have a projector, screen, player and PA system?

- If your venue doesn't have all of the equipment you need, could you hire some from the Cinema For All equipment hire scheme, or a community organisation nearby?
- Check whether the venue has a Premises Licence.

6. Choosing your first film

- Think about the audience you want to attract to your screening. How do you want them to feel when they visit your cinema?
- Check the BBFC age certificate for your chosen film.
- Book the licence for the film at least four weeks prior to the date you want to screen it (this allows time for you to market your screening).

7. Consider accessibility and inclusion

- Clearly signpost the accessibility and inclusion of your venue and screenings in your marketing.
- Can you offer subtitled screenings, or screenings with Descriptive Subtitles?
- Decide on the pricing structure for tickets to your screenings. Ensure that it helps you to cover costs but also reach your audiences; for example, could you offer pay-what-you-can ticketing or a family ticket option?

7. Promote your screening

- Give yourself a 4-6 week period to promote your screening once your film licence has been confirmed.
- Design an eye-catching digital or physical poster that contains the important details of your screening and shares the personality and purpose of your cinema.
- Choose an online form of marketing that suits you and your audience (e.g. social media, newsletter, website). Remember you can start small by focusing on just one or two to get going.
- Create a list of online and/or physical places where you can share your marketing and spread the word about your screening such as local cafes, the post office or other community organisations newsletters.

Once you have completed these steps, you have laid the foundations for your amazing community cinema. After your first screening, you will have gained lots of knowledge and skills that you can use to help continue to build your cinema further!

Community Support

Looking for other support and resources to help you on your journey? There are lots of organisations out there to help you. Here is a list to get you started:

Film Hub Scotland: Provides funding, programming, networking and training opportunities to their membership (it is free to join) of over 300 film organisations, including cinemas/community cinemas, film festivals and multi-arts centres.

Regional Screen Scotland: Operates the Screen Machine mobile cinema, bringing the big screen experience to over 40 communities annually in the Highlands and islands. They also provide information and advice about setting up local cinemas and signpost resources to support community cinemas.

Cinema For All: The national charity for the support and development of community cinema, helping more than 1600 community cinemas and film societies across the UK. They offer advice and support for free, as well as providing a huge range of additional services and benefits for their members from cheaper licences, discounted equipment hire and more.

Into Film: The UK's leading charity for film education. They champion and realise the potential of film, cinema and moving image to create inspiring, inclusive learning experiences. They offer funding, training and resources for working with young people and film.

Matchbox Cine: An independent film exhibitor and distributor, specialising in cult film, and an award-winning subtitler, specialising in access provision for film exhibition and distribution.

Independent Cinema Office (ICO): The UK's national body in support of independent cinemas, film festivals and exhibitors of all forms, offering advice, training and events.

Creative Scotland: Supports the cultural and creative sectors across all parts of Scotland. They are a funder, an advocate, and a public body that seeks to influence others to increase opportunity and maximise the impact their resources can offer. They provide funding for Scotland creative and cultural organisations.

Creative Lives: Champions community and volunteer-led creative activity across the UK and works to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative. They provide advice, support and resources for community groups and increase awareness of the links between creativity and wellbeing.