

SERVICE UPDATE

<u>Name of Function:</u>	City Growth
<u>Date:</u>	18/01/2024
<u>Title of Update:</u>	Belmont Cinema
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UPDATE:

At the Meeting of Finance and Resources on 13th September 2023 the committee approved awarding The Belmont Community Cinema 'Preferred Operator' status for the Belmont Cinema, which has been closed since October 2022 following the previous tenant operator entering into administration. This appointment was reached through a Prior Information Notice (PIN) through Public Contracts Scotland with a Request for Information (RFI), to market test for a prospective operator according to the financial modelling and recommendations set out in Council commissioned Feasibility Report.

Belmont Community Cinema Ltd (BCC) have set out plans to reopen the building as an independent, not-for-profit cinema, operated and programmed from Aberdeen which focuses on four key areas - cultural film programming, education and filmmaking, community, and customer experience. The group's aspiration is to make The Belmont the destination for Film in the northeast, through curated programming responding to community needs, a strategic partnership with Station House Media Unit (Shmu) to build on the cinema's previous education offer, school's programmes, community outreach, and establish the venue as a filmmaking/ experience hub. Similarly, the group wishes to reengage the wider cultural sector as a city centre hub for a wide range of groups, events and festivals, including their aspiration for establishing an Aberdeen Film Festival.

The Belmont Cinema is a Council-owned three screen cinema (with seating for 272, 146 and 67 persons, café/bar with catering facilities, kiosk shop, offices and seminar rooms. The Cinema includes a range of audio-visual technical equipment on site, including three digital projectors, which are the property of the Council. The venue which built in 1896 as a trade's hall, has primarily operated as a cinema in multiple iterations over the past century. It reopened as The Belmont Picturehouse in September 2000 after a major refurbishment by Aberdeen City Council and in 2014, the Centre for the Moving Image (CMI) took over the management and the Belmont became Belmont Filmhouse following previous operator, City Screen's exit.

The Preferred Operators status has been set out through a Memorandum of Understanding, the terms of which can be summarised as the Council providing BCC with an exclusivity period of 9 months(subject to extension) to allow the organisation sufficient time to fully scrutinise their financial assumptions and undertake a fundraising campaign to reach capital targets prior to entering a lease. This mitigates potential risk or uncertainty regarding long term financial liability and allows for both parties to undertake a process of due diligence, including a full structural survey, architect drawings and revised fundraising targets.

To provide structure and support to the process the Council has set up monthly progress review meetings, with representatives from BCC as well as Officers from Cultural Policy and Corporate Landlord in attendance. In addition to this the BCC are submitting month progress reports which provides with a record of progress.

The BCC group has to date been run by volunteers (including its trustees) with some pro-bono support from professional firms. In order to have the capacity and expertise required to deliver on its plans the group has applied for support towards the operation aspect of their development plan. In November they were awarded £40,000 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, £40,000 from the grant funding previously allocated to the cinema's previous operator and £60,000 from Screen Scotland Target Fund to be used for advancement of the operational plan, community engagement and employing professional services towards the refurbishment of the building. Plans to utilise the funding include the recruitment of a Head of Income Generation and Business Development, brand development for the new cinema operation as well as commissioning external advisors and associated professional fees.

BCC has sourced through Mustard Studio Associates, Rob Kenny, to provide Project Management support for all aspects of the building refurbishment, starting in December 2023. Rob will act as the group's representative on the building team, bringing extensive cinema outfit experience to the project, having been Curzon Cinema's Director of Cinema and Operations for 15 years.

The group has also recruited an experienced fundraiser, starting January 2024, with extensive local experience of capital fundraising. BCC group are confident that they will be able to deliver on their fundraising target through grant applications, private and corporate donations, and crowd funding in 2024. In the meantime, the group have continued to fundraise, submitting expression of interest and applications to Heritage Lottery Fund, Common Ownership Fund and Screen Scotland. BCC also organised a free screening of the classic Christmas film *It's a Wonderful Life* at the Cowdray Hall on the 23rd December to seek donations and raise awareness of the fundraising campaign.

For both fundraising purposes and to advance on a lease agreement, BCC has commissioned a building survey of the premise to be conducted, this being a requirement for many capital funders alongside a long-term lease. Council Officers are in the process of drawing up Head of Terms ready for review in January 2024. The timescales for this work align to the BCC business plan which has an outline schedule for lease agreement in early Spring, with building refurbishments then underway with a view to reopening the venue late 2024.