

Edinburgh Filmhouse regains its bar licence

The Edinburgh Filmhouse has regained its bar licence as its new operators hope to re-open the doors in six month's time.

Work to bring the independent cinema back to life is "moving forward," its new bosses say, but continues to face some hurdles.

While permission has been secured to sell alcohol in the Lothian Road building, which they say will be "essential" to the new venture's success, a third attempt to install a huge advertising screen outside in a bid to increase cash flow looks set to be refused next week.

If unsuccessful again, Filmhouse Edinburgh Ltd, the new charity formed to run the movie theatre, said this could "throw the future of the Filmhouse into doubt".

The Filmhouse has been boarded up for nearly two years, after a drop in the number of cinemagoers and a "perfect storm" of financial difficulties led to the collapse of previous owners, the Centre for the Moving Image (CMI).

Administrators were appointed to assess CMI's future. However they failed to request a transfer of the premises' alcohol licence in time. Councillors then refused to grant them an exemption—a move they were warned could prolong the cinema's closure and pave the way for it to be turned into "luxury flats".

A new application for a licence to allow on and off sales from the popular Filmhouse Café Bar was heard by the Licensing Board on Monday, September 23.

Rod White, a director of Filmhouse Edinburgh Ltd, which has raised over £2m for the re-opening, said after securing a 25 year lease from new owners Caledonian Heritable plans were "moving forward".

He said his team was currently aiming to open the doors again in March next year.

Mr White said the group, formed by former Filmhouse colleagues, had taken possession of "all the technical equipment that makes the Filmhouse the unique and nationally important cinema it was and will be again, capable of showing films from almost all current and historical film formats".

He said alongside the refurbishment, which is set to begin next month and will include adding a fourth, small 22-seat screen, there will be "considerable improvements to access," telling councillors: "The Filmhouse will not return in the dilapidated state it was in when it closed."

He added: "When drafting and submitting an application for a new licence, we tried to essentially reinstate what the licence had before it was lost.

"Bearing in mind that the ultimate use of the premises is a cinema with the main activity being the showing of films, although the ability to sell alcohol as part of that offering is important."

Licensing Board member Chas Booth said he had concerns over the request for off-sales – which allows drinks purchased to be consumed away from the premises – despite this being included in the cinema bar's previous licence.

Cllr Booth noted concerns had been raised by NHS Lothian as it

was in an area of over provision of licensed premises. "We shouldn't just dismiss those out of hand," he said.

David Key said he failed to see an issue with granting both on and off sales."If in the future they are selling branded whisky or whatever in the foyer," he said, "I can't see why someone can't walk in off the street and buy a couple of DVDs, a book and a bottle of whisky."

Norrie Work added: "I am actually quite surprised there are people trying to put restrictions on a business that might want sell a souvenir whisky or something like that.

"We're trying to restrict it too much and I really do not understand why.

"There's not people walking in off the street to buy off sales, it's not really a thing. We should not restrict it."

However the board's chair Louise Young said she shared the implied concerns the move would "open up flood gates potentially" to the Filmhouse becoming somewhere passers-by could nip into to buy alcohol.

Cllr Young proposed a condition only allowing off-sales to people visiting to see a movie or have a meal. On going to a vote, members were split and the chair, with the casting vote, opted to "err on the side of caution" and approve the licence which the condition attached.

Meanwhile a bid to add an advertising screen out the front of the cinema, measuring 9.5 metres wide by 5.9 metres high, has been recommended for refusal by council planning officers.

It is the third time the new operators have lodged proposals for the sign, which they say will generate advertising income vital to ensuring the Filmhouse can stay afloat financially.

A third refusal, which could come despite the proposed screen being reduced in size, made transparent and attached to metal

columns rather than to the building itself, could “throw the future of the Filmhouse into doubt,” a planning statement submitted by Filmhouse Edinburgh Ltd said.

“Surely an advertising banner – even one with LED lights – on the front of a newly spruced-up Filmhouse would add to Lothian Road’s character, not detract from it,” they said.

“Traditionally, cinemas use lighting displays to promote their latest blockbuster or classic re-run. I hope a compromise can be reached.

“Surely a thriving, independent cinema complex which attracts customers from far and wide is far preferable to an unloved, empty building at the heart of the city. We want more bright lights on Lothian Road, not fewer.”

But planners, setting out their recommendation to the council’s development management sub-committee which will meet to decide the application next week, said the proposed LED screen “would have an adverse impact on the character and setting of the listed building and would fail to preserve the character and appearance of the Conservation Area”.

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) said while it “greatly welcomed the return of the Filmhouse” the screen “does not represent an appropriate long-term design solution commensurate with the listed building’s cultural significance”.

It added: “We suggest a more discreet solution is adopted that allows greater visibility of the listed building.”

Commenting, Filmhouse Edinburgh director Ginnie Atkinson said: “Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Ltd., the charity which has taken a lease on the building at 88 Lothian Road with the ambition of re-opening the doors to the essential cultural cinema provision that was lost when the CMI went in to administration nearly two years ago is very pleased that the licence to serve

alcohol has been granted to their new organisation.

“The licence is of course essential in terms of being able to offer what customers will want and expect of their cinema going experience which is the choice to have a drink with their meal or before, after or in a film screening.

“The licence represents like-for-like in terms of what was provided by the old Filmhouse and the new. Filmhouse’s offer was never the same as a pub where people could go simply to drink and socialise until, for instance, 1.00 or 2.00am. We’re pleased the Council has been keen to support the re-opening of this much missed cultural venue in this way.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter