



Key questions in the Phoenix Curzon deal

Last month's news that the Phoenix Cinema Trust is planning to hand over day-to-day running to Curzon Cinemas raised many questions. Before the 28 October public meeting was announced, we put some of them directly to Alison Gold, Phoenix Cinema trustee, and Rob Kenny, director of cinema development for Curzon.

• The Archer: Has the deal between the Trust and Curzon been fully completed?

Alison Gold: We think it is the right thing to do so we are keen to complete it. We had a target date of 1 November in mind but we are still consulting. If we take the wrong decision and the cinema closes then it would be our fault. We are very keen that this doesn't happen.



Trustee: Alison Gold

• Has the Trust considered community fundraising as an alternative way of keeping the Phoenix running?

Alison Gold: We have looked at lots of fundraising opportunities. One thing we did earlier this year was put Gift Aid on ticket sales, but that's not enough on its own. There was a lot of hard work done to raise money for the Phoenix's centenary restoration in 2010. That is feasible for big capital projects, where grants and other sources of money are available. It's not so easy raising funds for the day-to-day costs of keeping a cinema running.

• How will Curzon arrest the decline in attendances, down from 100,000 to 75,000 per year in the last four years?

Rob Kenny: We have to arrest the decline. In our Knutsford cinema for example, which we took over from the council there, it was a similar situation with falling ticket sales. We have stopped that decline by putting £1 million into the cinema to grow the audiences. At the Phoenix, people can expect to see improved house facilities, like the bar and café, the toilets and perhaps the seats. Investing is the way to bring the audiences back.

• What other changes can the Phoenix audience expect to see?

Rob Kenny: We will not change the programming drastically. We have our own distribution arm and most of our films happen to play in East Finchley anyway. The terms of our deal state that important initiatives like the Kids Club, the dementia screenings and specials like the Jewish Film

Festival will continue. We will keep the Phoenix sign in the top right of the building. It is iconic. But we expect to adapt the front signage to incorporate the Curzon name. Things will be adapted rather than changed outright.

• Will there be a second screen?

Alison Gold: A second screen is technically feasible. There is space around the back of the existing building. It has been an idea that has been discussed by the Trust for decades but never gone any further.

Rob Kenny: In the medium term we would be keen to incorporate a second screen. It enables us to give a lot more variety in our programming and play films for longer if they are popular. A film that has been popular doesn't have to occupy the main screen for weeks, we can move it onto a second screen if it is still attracting an audience.



Curzon: Rob Kenny

• Will ticket prices go up?

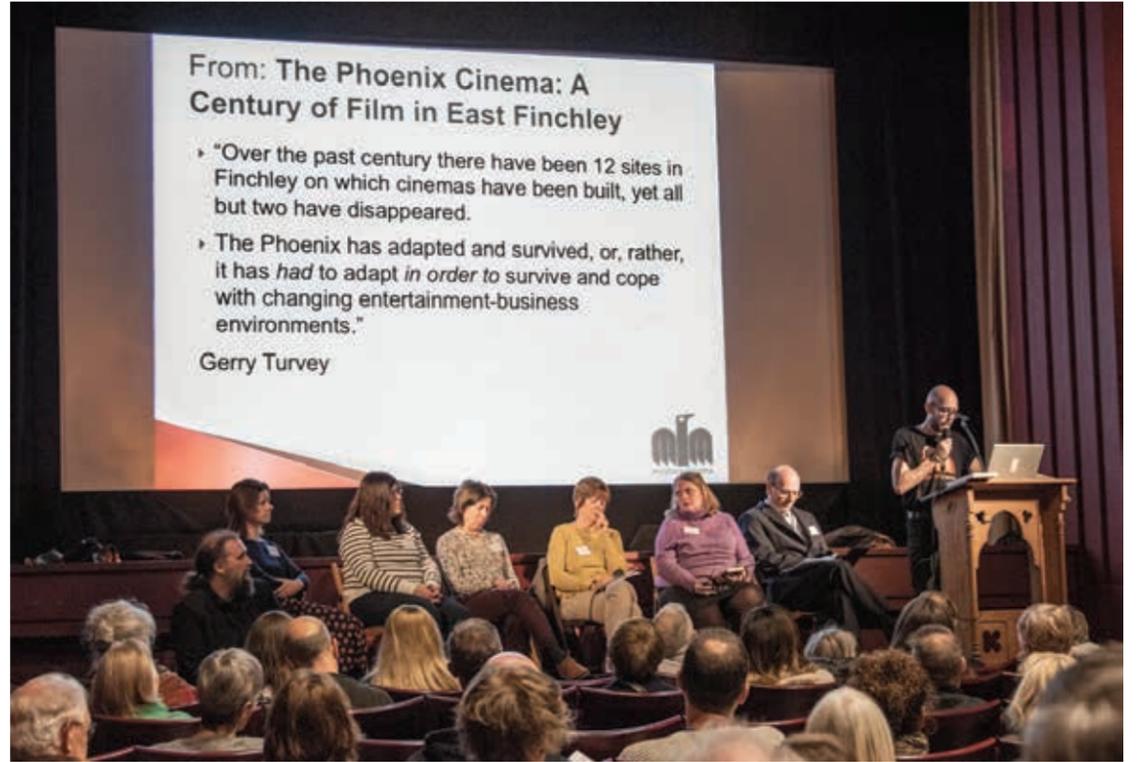
Rob Kenny: We haven't got any plans to put ticket prices up. We will have a look around the area at what others are charging. Somewhere in the region of the Arthouse in Crouch End is where we will probably set our prices. (Editor's note: Peak time prices at the Arthouse are currently £11 for adults, compared to £12 at the Phoenix).

• How will the Trust and Curzon work together?

Alison Gold: It has to be a relationship between the Trust and Curzon. The Trust will continue to guide the Phoenix's educational programmes and other community responsibilities. For the Trust it will be a positive thing to have a clearer focus on the educational and community side, rather than the job of keeping the cinema going. It will help us do that job better.

Rob Kenny: We both want the same things which is saving a great cinema. We are not going to do that by changing it drastically. It's not going to become a corporate monstrosity. That would make no sense.

Give us more time to save The Phoenix



Phoenix staff member Nathan Cable speaks to the public meeting alongside six of the cinema's trustees. Photo Mike Coles.

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"If the board asks for more time, we are open to that," he said. "We will pause our legal work to give them time to prove their case one way or the other."

Earlier, the Phoenix's Mr Cable had been greeted with applause and shouts of support from many in the cinema's auditorium when he said: "We sincerely believe the Phoenix should remain independent. We are asking the board to give us a few more months to find the finance and make the organisational improvements that will maximise profits and secure a future as an independent cinema."

A £20,000 Save the Phoenix crowdfunding campaign on the GoFundMe website had raised almost £4,000 at the time of going to press.

East Finchley councillor Arjun Mittra warned it would be difficult to pull out of the Curzon contract once it had been signed,

citing the example of Barnet Council's deal with Capita to run many of its services "where a lot of shiny promises were made at the start but it has since gone badly wrong".

The trustees made no commitment at the meeting to postpone the signing of the deal. The next step, they said, was a board meeting, with cinema staff, three days later, just after this newspaper went to press.

Chair of the trustees James Kessler told the public meeting that the timescale was urgent and the financial position of the cinema was "dire". Losses for the first half of this year stand at £60,000. However, he said the contract with Curzon had not been finalised and also insisted that safeguards had been built in.

He said: "We will have two remedies: the first is our contractual relationship and the trustees will make sure that Curzon delivers to the standards we have agreed; the second is

that there will be occasional break clauses. We will not be stuck long-term in an unhappy relationship."

There were many questions and passionate interjections from members of the public during the 90-minute meeting. "The Curzon plan has taken everyone by surprise," said one lady, who has been a regular Phoenix-goer for more than 30 years. "Independence will be sacrificed irretrievably," said another.

One man with experience in the field of charities and fundraising called on the board to "harness the emotions" of everyone in the room to draw up a strategy that kept the Phoenix running as an independent cinema. Another said the Phoenix board could not afford emotions, adding: "If income and footfall are dropping, they have got to find a way out of it."

See page 11 for readers' letters about The Phoenix

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