

5 YEARS OF ACCESS

For millions with hearing or visual impairments, the last five years has seen a revolution in Cinema. Before digital subtitling, a majority of the deaf or hard-of-hearing simply didn't go to cinemas, their being just another off-limits entertainment venue and all just easier to await the subtitled DVD release. Similarly, prior to audio description, Cinema had nothing to offer the blind or partially-sighted. But, thanks to UK film distributors, most popular cinema releases are now available with digital subtitles and audio description files. And, thanks to UK exhibitors and the UK Film Council, around 200 cinemas now have facilities to synchronise the above files with the film reel enabling subtitles to be overlaid onto the cinema screen so that a separate, narrated soundtrack may be broadcast through wireless headphones.

Since 2005, the number of disabled accessible shows has increased by almost 40 pc, with now up to 1,000 subtitled shows played each month: and not foreign-language films, but mainstream product such as *Cars*, *Miami Vice* and *King Kong*. Moreover, nowadays all major UK distributors release many of their films with Access features (450 to date), with many smaller

DEREK BRANDON,
founder of
YourLocalCinema.com,
recounts the progress
so far of the UK Cinema
Access Programme.



distributors also making product accessible. So how did the Access programme begin?

INDUSTRYWIDE EFFORT

By the late 1990s, changes to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) made it unlaw-

ful for service providers to discriminate against disabled people and so, as service providers, cinemas were expected to make reasonable adjustments. A Disability Working Group (DWG) was set up which included CEA, FDA, technology companies and the main organisations representing the hearing and visually-impaired. Then, in Summer 2000, Pathé's *Chicken Run* was the first mainstream English language film to be captioned for deaf/hard-of-hearing audiences. Five captioned-prints were produced and toured a selection of cinemas.

It was at this time that I too became personally involved in the Access programme. As father to a deaf child, captioned-shows afforded us opportunity to go to the cinema *together*, even if it had meant travelling miles for one inconveniently-scheduled show. Because of the captions, my son had understood and enjoyed *Chicken Run* and simply asked why all films couldn't be subtitled. Consequently, and believing the audience for accessible shows to be considerable, we launched "yourlocalcinema.com", an online listings and information service for accessible cinema – not just for people that had never enjoyed the cinema experience, but also for those who had (partially) lost their hearing or vision. We worked with the industry to help increase the numbers of subtitled films and shows to help improve audience figures.





DTS-CSS

In 2001, DTS introduced its groundbreaking Cinema Subtitling System (DTS-CSS), installed in some 140 UK cinemas today. Utilising the same DTS disc-based technology, CSS synchronised a disc containing subtitle files to a standard print, projecting subtitles directly onto the cinema screen using a discrete LCD projector and so eliminated the need for separately-captioned prints. It could broadcast audio description too: a specially-narrated soundtrack for the visually-impaired.

DISTRIBUTION

When film distributors recognised their responsibility under the new DDA legislation, FDA ensured that a majority of popular releases would be subtitled and audio-described to play in suitably-equipped theatres. To create awareness, FDA introduced symbols for its promotional adverts and posters to indicate that the film was available with Access features in selected cinemas.

With the help of the RNIB, and subtitle and description producers ITFC, the first film to be produced for the DTS system was *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Ten hard-captioned prints toured nearly every major UK cinema also and, in all, over 500 captioned *Harry Potter* shows were screened enabling thousands of

deaf/hard-of-hearing and blind/partially-sighted children to enjoy the film.

In 2002, CEA proposed that the UK Film Council (UKFC), which recommended spending lottery funds to improve Cinema Access, also include equipping over 100 cinemas with digital subtitle and audio description facilities. In turn, UKFC invited the public's response. Thousands replied together with a 1,400-signature petition from one Surrey primary school which, interestingly, had just 12 deaf pupils. UKFC had the BFI conduct more research and, following consultation, BFI recommended that digital subtitle-and-description facilities be installed in many cinemas across the UK. Exhibitor-distributors forged ahead and digital subtitle/description facilities began subsequent install around the UK. And by the close of 2002, around 40 accessible mainstream films were released, with around 30 cinemas having access facilities, and so it became clear that many more accessible cinemas would be needed to keep pace with demand.

DEVELOPMENTS

In 2003 DTS introduced another Access initiative, its versatile XD10 Cinema Media Player which came with captioning and audio description as standard for the UK, making it easy for cinemas to include Access in their regular digital

sound upgrade programmes; and, as accessible shows became more commonplace, the popular National Schools Film Week and many film festivals – including the Times-BFI London Film Festival – began featuring captioned shows.

Then, in September 2003, UKFC introduced its pioneering Cinema Access Programme, which by 2004 had helped finance around 80 more accessible cinemas. The UKFC also helped to fund the yourlocalcinema.com information service, and created a print provision fund so that smaller distributors could join the programme. Following the UKFC's lead, the Northern Ireland Film & Television Commission added 10 accessible cinemas, and, as we speak, both Scottish Screen and Sgrin Cmyru Wales are looking to pilot similar schemes.

Next, accessible movie trailers were introduced in 2004, the Internet becoming *the* place for showing first-run trailers. Both ITFC and IMS now regularly produce accessible Internet trailers for, amongst others, Warner and UIP. Subsequently, 2005-06 saw further growth

ACCESS TIMELINE

- 1999 — CEA acts upon need for DDA compliance.
- 2000 — Pathé's *Chicken Run* is first 'captioned' film.
YourLocalCinema.com launched.
- 2001 — DTS launches DTS-CSS.
- 2002 — CEA proposes UKFC spend lottery money on improving Access.
- 2003 — DTS launches XD10 Media Player.
Over 100 captioned titles available.
Captioned films shown in major film festivals
Dolby introduces its subtitling & audio description system, ScreenTalk.
- 2004 — UKFC launches Cinema Access Programme (2003/04)
Funds ourlocalcinema.com
Offers a 'print provision' fund for smaller distributors.
Accessible movie trailers launched on Internet.
- 05/06 — 200 UK cinemas suitably Access-equipped.



in Cinema Access with presently 200 UK accessible cinemas – most screening regularly. And let’s just pause to reflect on this fantastic progress: from zero to 200 accessible cinemas in just five years! But can even more be done to further improve Access?

MOVING FORWARD

In addition to listings and information on captioned cinema, yourlocalcinema.com collects important feedback, which sometimes mimics a radio phone-in show. The negative feedback, however, just highlights the lack of choice: most popular films today may be subtitled but there still aren’t enough shows on at suitable times.

Meantime, hard-captioned English

equipment isn’t always profitable for cinemas, since if they screen *even more* subtitled shows, then fewer people may attend per show. But I would hope that most cinemas view subtitled shows in the same way they do disabled ramps, lifts, wheel-

features, such as ‘subtitle readers’, of digital projection. And if these features were to be utilised (with, say, each cinema screening a couple of subtitled shows a week) hearing- and visually-impaired people could enjoy the new, Digital Cinema *and*

ACCESS FACT

Films for the visually-impaired can play with audio description many times a day; audio description can play all the time and without disturbing the general audience.



language prints have been discontinued, which means that now, only cinemas with the subtitling systems – still less than a third of all UK theatres – can screen the latest releases. More accessible cinemas, more shows per cinema – or both – would be welcome. However, installing Access

chair spaces and loop systems – not something to directly profit from, but more as tools to enable communities needing extra help to enjoy the cinema experience. I personally feel that to further improve cinema access – at minimal cost – a logical step would be to utilise the built-in Access

have so many more accessible shows from which to choose. Again, this wouldn’t interfere with normal scheduling – subtitled shows still account for less than 1 pc of screenings and, in so doing, exhibitors could, at a stroke, almost double the number of subtitled shows.

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