Films Inside

A report by Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor for Staffordshire PLS

Exploring a season of films on the theme of Fatherhood with adult prisoners, young offenders and a community group across Staffordshire.

‘It’s a great concept. Films are a fantastic way to convey important ideas that can lead you to startling realisations about your life.’

Participant: HMP Featherstone

‘I felt like it was me being away and my little one always wanting me to be home, and waiting…’

Participant at HMP&YOI Brinsford discussing Father and Daughter, Films Inside

‘We were intrigued by the content and impressed by the range of films made available. It was good to see the audience enjoying films they might not normally have chosen to watch and engaging in lively discussion afterwards. Of particular interest was the insight into the work of the BBFC and the opportunity to meet Michael Dudok de Wit and hear him talk about his career.

The community film project at Wombourne Library was an excellent way to demonstrate the value of libraries in offering people access to innovative, quality, cultural activities within their community, perhaps creating a template that could be used at libraries nationwide. The project not only offered an interesting range of challenging film titles, but also provoked discussion and further exploration of the world of film through the library collection of book stock. This was also a great opportunity to work in partnership with organisations such as the BBFC and BFI and to learn more about how they work and to explore how we can cooperate on future projects.’

Scott Whitehouse and Stuart Hill: Wombourne Library
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Introduction

Films Inside is an initiative involving prison and community film groups. It was delivered by Staffordshire County Council’s Prison Library Service with support from The BBFC, The BFI, Picturehouse and Staffordshire County Council’s Public Library Service.

Staffordshire County Council Prison Library Service delivers library services in the six public sector prisons and one of the private prisons located in the County. The service is part of Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service.

BBFC: The British Board of Film Classification, previously the British Board of Film Censors, is a non-governmental organization, founded by the film industry in 1912.

BFI: Were founded in 1933 and are a charity governed by a Royal Charter. They combine cultural, creative and industrial roles, bringing together the BFI National Archive and BFI Reuben Library, film distribution, exhibition and education at BFI Southbank and BFI IMAX, publishing and festivals.

Picturehouse Cinemas: A network of cinemas in the United Kingdom, operated by Picturehouse Cinemas Ltd and owned by Cineworld.

Aims and Objectives

- Screen: Wild Bill, Creed, To Kill a Mockingbird, Father and Daughter and Father of the Bride, for a significant number of young offenders and adult prisoners across three prisons in Staffordshire
- Form a film group in each of the prison libraries to discuss and evaluate the film(s)
- Engage a public library to form a community film club and watch the film(s)
- Share opinions on the film(s) anonymously between the prison film club groups and the community film club
- Break down barriers so young offenders and prisoners feel part of the wider community
- Build confidence and self-esteem
- Explore the themes of Fatherhood
- Enhance basic skills to enable access to future learning opportunities and employability
- Build on partnerships within prison and public library services
- Raise the profile of the prison libraries
Partners

Staffordshire Prison Library Service
Staffordshire Public Library Service
The BBFC
The BFI
Picturehouse Cinemas

HMP&YOI Brinsford: un-convicted & convicted 18 + years young offenders prison
HMP Featherstone: adult male Category C closed training establishment
HMP Oakwood: adult male Category C prison operated by G4S
Wombourne public library: Staffordshire Libraries and Information Service
Background

Between May 2017 to October 2017 Staffordshire Prison Library Service delivered a unique community model of Films Inside that links a community group in a public library with young offenders and adult male prisoners to discuss films with a specific theme, namely ‘fatherhood.’

Gerard Lemos, of Lemos and Crane, initially approached Alan Smith with the idea of linking the BBFC to the work of the Prison Library Service. The proposal was received enthusiastically and Alan began the lengthy process of contacting and visiting libraries and prisons to discuss the project with librarians to determine how viable it would be.

To curate a list of films to use the BBFC education department worked with the BFI and Picturehouse to create a shortlist, ensuring the films represented a wide range of genre, film making style, film history. The final list included a silent short film, a British film, a contemporary US film which was the reboot of a blockbuster boxing series, a 1950s b/w comedy, and a classic 1960s Hollywood literary adaptation. The BBFC education created worksheets for each of the films, including a synopsis, information about the film's classification history and wider cultural history, and a series of discussion or talking points, adapted from the BFI's guide to working using it as a literacy/education resource (with kind permission of the BFI).

The decision to incorporate several groups would continue to demonstrate that prisoners can be part of a much larger project taking place within a community, and that their input into the discussions about the films and their impact is of valued importance. This is highlighted perfectly by Louise Mason, Library Supervisor HMP&YOI Brinsford reviewing the library film group:

‘The young offenders often feel that there is a major barrier between themselves and the wider community. Within the prison system they are often asked to be involved in projects that are very much ‘in house’ projects. Films Inside offered them an opportunity to share their views with members of the public and to hear the opinions of the community group as well as older prisoners. For many of these offenders they had never been part of such a group and the change in their behaviour became clear very quickly just from sitting quietly and watching a film that they needed to comment on.’

Louise Mason, Library Supervisor: HMP&YOI Brinsford

It was really beneficial to speak to the librarians about how they had used the films and which of them had sparked more interest with which groups - for example Creed had huge resonance with some older inmates who talked younger inmates through the back story of the character and his coach Rocky. It was also useful for to hear how the group leaders had integrated talking about the films, with wider discussions around emotional development, friendship, reading, stories, and experiences.

Lucy Brett: BBFC

Wombourne library has a license to screen films because the library is housed within a community centre. They were keen to take part in the project and began advertising for members of a Wednesday evening film group. Once established, the group were keen
to challenge themselves with the different films and genres, and also keen to hear the views of the prison groups involved.

In order for the prisons to screen the films the BBFC directly approached film licensing bodies, distributors and film industries.

‘I was a little sceptical at the start but I have been pleasantly surprised by the reactions to the films by the prisoners and this has helped to change my (clearly wrong) first impressions of how I thought they would react.’

**Wombourne Library film group participant**

One of the films chosen for the project was Wild Bill. Acclaimed director Dexter Fletcher was so enthusiastic about the project that he personally organised the permission for Wild Bill to be screened and was keen to participate. At one point he was all set to visit HMYOI Brinsford and introduce a screening of his film, but sadly schedules would prevent the visit from taking place. He did however send messages of support to the group via Alan Smith and signed a poster of the film for display in the prison library.

At a supervisors meeting for prison librarians, Alan proposed the idea of having involvement from three Staffordshire libraries. Essentially a focus group would be formed in each library of around 10-15 prisoners. This was met with an enthusiastic response from all, despite the many challenges that delivering such a project was sure to bring.

‘The key for me is to not to create too much extra work for staff who are already delivering a number of projects within the prisons as well as doing the “day job” side of prison work. Films Inside allows for a great deal of flexibility and also for someone to project manage the whole thing to ensure that staff aren’t overwhelmed by the task.’

**Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor: Staffordshire PLS**

**Delivery**

Prior to watching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Creed*, *Father of the Bride*, *Wild Bill* and *Father and Daughter*, each group was visited by Alan so that the project could be discussed fully with both staff and participants. This helped to ensure that everyone was clear on the aims and objective of the project and people were still happy to be part of it. Individual’s feelings with regard to how to evaluate the films were also sounded out during this initial stage. Many of the groups expressed a preference for oral rather than written evaluation.

Due to the scale of the project and involvement of so many groups, it was determined that delivery would run from May until October. This also meant that individuals who would be helping to deliver the project could look at their own work commitments and choose a time that suited them best. Alan was prepared to visit each group before, during and after delivery to ensure that everyone was supported throughout.
At HMP&YOI Brinsford Library, the project was delivered throughout September. A focus group of 10 young adults met in the library for a period of two weeks in early September to watch the films. The young adults had been selected by Louise Mason (Library Supervisor) and Sally-Ann Ploughman, who works exclusively with prisoners who are fathers at HMP YOI Brinsford. Sally-Ann and Louise led the group and refreshments were provided by the prison library. Each session lasted approximately two and a half hours (including a ten minute coffee break) and always involved members of the group discussing their views of the film aloud and also completing questionnaires. The groups also benefited from additional information about the films that was provided by the BBFC.

During the week the group was joined by various members of prison staff who helped to encourage them with this project. The group formed a close bond and felt part of something very special.

‘I tend to work with fathers inside on a one to one basis, so it was a wonderful opportunity to put a connected group together within the prison library and share the discussions and themes of fatherhood through a new medium.’

Sally-Ann Ploughman: HMP&YOI Brinsford

‘I was very happy to take part and more than that I appreciate being asked to be involved in something as diverse as this.’

Participant: HMP&YOI Brinsford

During June to October the newly formed Wombourne library film group met on a Wednesday evening every three weeks. The library provided displays and related film literature along with refreshments. Alan would attend each screening to talk to the group about how the films were being received in the prisons and to introduce each new film to the group. Scott Whitehouse (Stock Services and Activities Officer, Staffordshire Libraries) provided feedback forms for participants to review the films and Cheryl and Stuart (Library Supervisors) aided Scott in setting up each screening, being on hand to discuss the films after each screening and helped to signpost members to the library catalogue of film literature.

Lucy Brett (BBFC), Mark Reid (BFI), Leah Byrne (Picturehouse cinemas) and Michaël Dudok de Wit (Oscar winning Film Director) visited the film group at Wombourne and delivered a presentation about the work of the BBFC as well as a screening of Michaël Dudok de Wit’s film ‘Father and Daughter’ with an introduction by the director.

‘I honestly couldn’t believe it when they said that the director of Father and Daughter would be introducing the film, but sure enough he was there along with a wonderful presentation from Lucy Brett from the BBFC. A truly magical evening.’

Participant: Wombourne film group
At HMP Featherstone Library, the project was delivered throughout August and September. A focus group of 15 adult prisoners met in the library to watch the films. The prisoners had been selected by Adeline Fergus (Library Supervisor) and she also led the group and provided refreshments for the group. As in HMP YOI Brinsford, each session lasted approximately two and a half hours (including a ten minute coffee break) and always involved members of the group discussing their views of the film aloud and completing questionnaires. The groups also benefited from additional information about the films that was provided by the BBFC.

Lucy Brett (BBFC), Mark Reid (BFI), Leah Byrne (Picturehouse cinemas) and Michaël Dudok de Wit (Oscar winning Film Director) visited HMP Featherstone to meet the film group and deliver a presentation about the work of the BBFC and to discuss the project and its impact on the prisoners.

The following quote seems to summarise the aims and hopes of the project:

“It’s a great concept. Films are a fantastic way to convey important ideas that can lead you to startling realisations about your life.”

Participant: HMP Featherstone

“The quote above really emphasises how well the aims of the project were realised.”

Lucy Brett (BBFC)

“The prisoners quickly embraced the usefulness of using a medium like film to explore wider themes.”

Leah Byrne (Picturehouse Cinemas)

At HMP Oakwood Library, the project was also delivered and a focus group of 15 adult prisoners met in the library there to watch the films. The prisoners had been selected by Lindsey Crump (Library Supervisor) and she also led the group and provided refreshments. As in the other prisons, each session lasted approximately two and a half hours (including a ten minute coffee break) and always involved members of the group discussing their views of the film aloud and completing questionnaires. The groups also benefited from additional information about the films that was provided by the BBFC.

“I absolutely loved this and it has made me start to watch films properly.”

Participant: HMP Oakwood
By the end of October, Alan had met with all the separate groups for evaluation sessions and brought this stage of the project to its conclusion.

Evaluation

‘The scope of the genres and the age of some of the films really allowed for everyone in the group to find something that they could relate to and then consider their own experiences and attitudes towards fatherhood.’

Participant: HMP Oakwood

Since most of the groups had expressed a preference for oral evaluation it was decided that an informal approach would gain the best response from the groups with written questionnaires provided as optional. It was agreed that each evaluation meeting would take place in the area where that particular group had been meeting and also at the time of day that they had been meeting. This would help to ensure that the group felt comfortable and that there would be an element of control to each session.

Discussions were far reaching - the group at Featherstone talked about BBFC age ratings, and why we might think about ideas like violence, drugs and discrimination. They were particularly interested that we based our ratings criteria on talking to people and children and engaged when hearing about how we considering child development and audience reactions – especially how thinking about those things might have changed over time. For example they were keen to explore how To Kill A Mockingbird was rated on its original release, weighing up suitability for children and educational benefit of films with difficult themes against audience expectations (then and now).

Lucy Brett: BBFC

The overall theme of ‘fatherhood’ was central to the project and this therefore provided the consistent theme for all evaluations across the groups.

‘This project has given me a lot of pause for thought about being a dad. I’m not sure if I would have thought about all these issues by myself or even just through reading.’

Participant: HMP Featherstone

Other key influences considered before evaluation included:

- Ensuring that everyone had a chance to comment and that the discussion was not dominated by one or two strong personalities.
- Anxiety of participants i.e. feeling they should give answers they felt we would like to hear or anxiety about speaking out in a group
- To be certain that participation was voluntary
- In the case of the three prison groups, factors within the prison itself had to be considered i.e. any changes to regime or disturbances on the Wings would have an influence over the mood of individuals within the group.
Each evaluation was led by Alan Smith and began with a general discussion, often about films. This would invariably get people talking and develop a sense of trust between the group members. When it was felt that the discussion was peaking, the specific screened films and the topic of fatherhood would be introduced into the conversation and debated. Below are examples of the reactions from the groups to the films.

1. **Overall Review of the films:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Wild Bill</th>
<th>To Kill a Mockingbird</th>
<th>Father and Daughter</th>
<th>Father of the Bride</th>
<th>Creed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMP&amp;YOI Brinsford</td>
<td>Watching this has encouraged me to keep striving to stay on the straight and narrow and family is the most important thing in life.</td>
<td>I felt moved by the racism of that era in America and also how they tried to justify two wrongs making a right.</td>
<td>I was moved by the film because I feel like it’s what I’m going through except I’m always seeing walls she was looking out at the sea and all she wants is to see her family again.</td>
<td>I related to this from the point of view that I’m a struggling father trying to do the right thing and it always goes wrong.</td>
<td>I found this film difficult because of everything Rocky goes through. I’ve seen this happen to people in my family but it did make me think about how important it is to respect older people and their wisdom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>Wild Bill encourages people who are required to change their behaviour to adapt a more positive lifestyle and put their children first.</td>
<td>It is very sad to watch this film and realise that after so many years these prejudices still exist today.</td>
<td>I struggled with grasping the concepts of the film but I was so impressed of the visual aspects of the animation and after discussing it with the group I want to watch it again.</td>
<td>It made me think how old do your children have to be before you can actually let them go.</td>
<td>This film made me realise how much you need the support from a father or a father figure. It also made me appreciate that you should try to put others first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Oakwood</td>
<td>This film moved me more than any of the others particularly in the scene where Bill fully realises how it feels to be a dad.</td>
<td>It’s startling how supposedly good people could treat another race so horrifically because of the colour of their skin.</td>
<td>I have never watched a silent animated film before. My initial thought was that I would hate it but out of all the films I have watched, this is the one I know I shall never forget.</td>
<td>It’s hard to relate to a film where the father is clearly so rich but deep down he’s still an ordinary man trying to do the right thing for his daughter and just like me he doesn’t always make the right choice.</td>
<td>Creed is all about fighting for your goals and future no matter where you are from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wombourne Library</td>
<td>We were surprised by how heartfelt, sweet and funny the story was despite such a realistic, gritty and uncomfortable setting.</td>
<td>this shines because of the naturalness of the children’s acting.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Father and Daughter**: quite simply beautiful, evocative and moving.

**Father of the Bride**: Far better than the Steve Martin version.

**Creed**: Didn’t expect to ever enjoy a Rocky film but found myself absorbed.

2. **How the films affected the groups:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMP YOI Brinsford</td>
<td>‘Whenever I have watched films in the past I have never really thought about them or even talked through them. Being part of a group, watching together, discussing the films at the end has changed my whole outlook on film and how many hidden meanings can be found within them.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Featherstone</td>
<td>‘We were all a little sceptical in case there was a hidden agenda to this, but in fact watching films about fatherhood made us all open up more to discuss our own experiences and feel comfortable enough to do that in front of fellow prisoners. Definitely worthwhile.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP Oakwood</td>
<td>‘Fantastic scheme, great choice of films. These have had a real impact on all of us, made discussions very interesting and inspired us all to find new films to discuss.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wombourne Library</td>
<td>‘All excellent choices with ‘Wild Bill’ and ‘Father and Daughter’ standing head and shoulders above the rest.’</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Impact of the project**

Participation in the Films Inside project has had a huge effect on all those involved and positive outcomes are evident for the prisoners, prison libraries, public libraries and community members. The project has helped to break down barriers between the prison community and the local community and has helped to raise the self-esteem of both the young offenders and adult prisoners who took part, as they have made substantial contributions to a wider project.

‘This has been very thought provoking for any fathers in prison. We are all missing our children and often find it difficult to communicate this to other prisoners so to find like-minded prisoners and share a movie and our experiences has been a very changing experience for me personally.’

**Participant: HMP Oakwood**

The prisoners at HMP Oakwood & HMP Featherstone felt that it was an important opportunity to communicate their experience to the young offenders in the hope that it might help to break the cycle of crime and develop a sense of what fatherhood meant and the potential impact on their own lives in the future.
‘I hope that being involved in this pilot project will help develop a wider understanding for people in the community that prisoners react to these films in a similar way to themselves.’

**Participant: HMP Featherstone**

The above quote highlights how having a connection to the community outside of the prison is important in order for prisoners to develop their own sense of value.

The young offenders at HMP&YOI Brinsford responded positively to the knowledge that older prisoners as well as teenagers their own age had watched the films and passed comment. They also felt the comradeship that had developed between the members of the Prison Library group was something they would never forget.

Watching short films with the inmates was a fantastic opportunity to talk through how they responded to the film, and share questions and discoveries, and hear how the different types of films - some familiar to the audience, some entirely unfamiliar, were received and discussed, and it was clear that having external speakers, especially those like Michael who had actually made the film himself, gave an extra dimension to the learning experience.

**Lucy Brett: BBFC**

‘There is very little opportunity to talk to other prisoners in places like this, only when you’re on association or at the gym, and in those settings you don’t really talk about anything of real importance. There are a lot of prisoners who like to watch films and to read about films and the prison library and schemes like Films Inside give like-minded prisoners the chance to do that in a peaceful setting. I think the fact that we then know that our thoughts are being shared with other groups in the wider community is fantastic.’

**Participants: HMP&YOI Brinsford**

The Wombourne public library film group welcomed the chance to be involved in such an interesting and diverse project that would reach so many different people.

‘To be visited by members of the BBFC, BFI, Picturehouse Cinemas and a film director is something which we never expected to happen when we first signed up to this project.’

**Participant: Wombourne library**

The project also created opportunities for the prisoners to meet people, like Michaël Dudok de Wit who could tell them about his life and work which ensured the films and discussions felt ‘real’ to them.

It is also important to note that this project allowed prisoners to watch and discuss a range of films that they may not have access to, or choose to watch, in other circumstances and therefore they were given the opportunity to extend their knowledge and understanding of different genres of film.
Conclusion

Through Films Inside an insight was gained into the varying ways in which *Wild Bill, Father and Daughter, To Kill a Mockingbird, Father of the Bride* and *Creed* could be viewed, discussed and interpreted across a broad spectrum of age-ranges and cultural backgrounds. It was also observed that barriers can easily be broken down between groups of participants in different settings by running a project such as Films Inside in which the opinions of all of the participants are valued and seen as insightful.

Each group was able to learn from the other and this has improved self-esteem amongst the prison groups and also enhanced the learning of the community groups.

The young offenders and the adult prisoners across three Staffordshire prisons have gained self-confidence and a sense of worth by participating in a project which has reached far beyond the walls of the prison and had an impact in the wider community. This will have a very positive affect on their lives after prison when they return to their local communities.

All the groups have enhanced their listening and social skills by being part of a group and taking other peoples’ thoughts and opinions on board. It has also helped to spark lively debate and enhanced the enjoyment of watching films for all those who have taken part.

Exploring the theme of ‘fatherhood’ also allowed members of the groups to reflect on their own experiences of this and to consider and develop their own understanding and views of this, potentially having a positive impact on their own family experiences.

'It takes a lot of work to put together a group of prisoners (security checks/changes in the regime etc..) but, when you see the obvious impact of a project like this, behaviour/attitude changes, enquiries about further reading and questions about when we will repeat the project again, you know that the whole process was worth being part of.'

*Adeline Fergus (Library Supervisor): HMP Featherstone*

‘This was something completely new for us in Staffordshire PLS and for our public library colleagues. Everyone put 100% in to making this happen and we were so well supported by the BBFC/BFI & Picturehouse as well as the tremendous kindness of Michael making the effort to come and talk to our groups. The impact has been widespread, I haven’t heard a single negative reaction to this project and I would gladly be part of it again.’

*Alan Smith: Prison Library Service Advisor: Staffordshire PLS*

‘We feel very strongly that films offer a ‘third space’ between people of different backgrounds that can bring them together into conversation and exchange. Well-chosen films can stimulate discussion between people that enables them to explore aspects of experience and identity that might be difficult to manage otherwise. The Films Inside project demonstrated to us how films could facilitate sharing and exchange between people of very different backgrounds, enabling them to meet in the common experience of watching and talking about film.’

*Mark Reid: BFI*
Future Potential

In order to sustain and develop the projects in other public libraries licensing issues to screen films would need to be checked. If this could be done across Staffordshire libraries, then potentially a film group could become part of the universal offers that libraries can provide for their community. In addition to this, the prison library service may need to explore how to obtain a license to show films or excerpts as part of a literacy or education framework.

The element of ‘added value’ was very important to all the groups. The visit by Michael Dudok de Wit, Lucy Brett, Mark Reid and Leah Byrne was exceptionally well received. Generally there was high enthusiasm from the creative industries and media/film education sector which could be built on if the project was repeated.

Within prison libraries there is potential to do a second project involving more prisons and ‘Films Inside’ could be linked to the National Literacy Trust ‘Books Unlocked’ project if there were enough Man Booker titles that have been transferred to the screen.

All of the above would be worth exploring following the publication of this report.
Acknowledgements

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Staffordshire Library and Information Services

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Cheryl Reynolds (Library Supervisor, Wombourne Library)
David Austin (Chief Executive, British Board of Film Classification)
Lucy Brett (Head of Education, British Board of Film Classification)
Dexter Fletcher (Film Director)
Gerard Lemos (Lemos&Crane)
Mark Reid (Head of Education, British Film Institute)
Leah Byrne (Audience Development Manager, Picturehouse Cinemas)
Michaël Dudok de Wit (Film Director)

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