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Empty Shops Toolkit

Part of the Our Place project

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1. Introduction

Across the country, people are worrying about their high street. Shops have closed, sites bought for regeneration sit empty while recession-shy developers wait for the right time, and people spend more time at out-of-town retail parks or buying online.

But these empty spaces in town centres are still useful. They're perfect places for short, temporary projects that embrace the meanwhile – the time between the last commercial activity and whatever comes next. And a nation of meanwhile shopkeepers have been learning the skills to use these spaces, to be nimble and grab every opportunity while they can. Work like the MLAs 'Our Places' shops in Blackburn and Taunton has shown how large organisations can adopt similar practices and help to deliver locally distinct projects.

Artists have exhibited, museums created temporary local history collections, podcasters recorded oral history before it's lost forever. People have created meeting spaces, workshops, studios, ateliers, community centres and places for play. The public have come back into the private, commercial spaces in town centres and made them their own again.

Empty shops are providing the space for celebrating the locally distinct, culturally diverse, creatively rich nature of the UK's towns and cities. This toolkit will give you some inspiration, provide examples, signpost possible funding, highlight support and show in practical steps how to plan, deliver and evaluate a project, start to finish.

2. The background

and some useful facts you can use to argue your case

In recent years, the British high street has suffered badly.

Firstly came the '**clone town**' syndrome identified by the New Economics Foundation (nef), where local businesses were replaced by the same big retailers and coffee shops in every town - and then the high street was hit by a severe recession.

The Local Data Company, who track empty shops on high streets across Britain, report **a national vacancy rate of 12.6%** (April 10) – or **18,000 empty shops** across the 705 towns they monitor. Meanwhile, Barry Gilbertson, who watches real estate for PricewaterhouseCoopers, has warned that up to **a fifth of empty shops will never be reoccupied**. (hedgehogs.net, 10th February 2010)

“People are increasingly worried about boarded-up shops and vacant land in their towns and cities. It is vital that we do all we can to enable vacant properties to be used for temporary purposes until demand for retail premises starts to improve. Not only will this help to ensure that our towns and high streets are attractive places where people want to go, it can also stimulate a wide range of other uses such as community hubs, arts and cultural venues, and informal learning centres, which can unlock people’s talent and creativity.”

Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG)

Following CLG's announcement in early 2009, which was inspired by small-scale local activism highlighted by the Empty Shops Network, local councillors, tourism groups, cultural organisations and many business leaders are now behind the temporary reuse of empty shops. Thanks to CLG **107 towns and cities have received £52,000** each to support such use. And Arts Council England has matched this with an additional **£500,000 of 'Grants for the Arts'** money.

John McGuigan is director of city development in Coventry, which has received both a government grant and Arts Council England funding, and is realistic about the impact of this work. “We’re not pretending we’ve got the answer and we’re not going to put public art into 60 plus shops but where there are several empty shops together, we’d like to look at keeping those shops animated.” (Mary Griffin, 18th April 2009, Coventry Telegraph)

Neil Saunders of Verdict Research thinks the issue is about more than the recession. Talking to the BBC, he explained that an estimated **88 million extra square feet of retail space has been built** over the past 20 years, and this surplus of shops has contributed to the problem. (Julian Joyce, 28th February 2009 BBC News)

As well as there being too many shops, there are other reasons for vacancy. If redevelopment or regeneration is planned, a process called '**land assembly**' is started, to bring all the buildings and land in that area

together into one ownership – and this can often mean shops and businesses are moved out leaving empty buildings.

And many shops off the high street are simply not worthwhile business spaces, with not enough visitors for many shops to survive. In some of these '**secondary retail**' areas even lower rents are not enough to tempt business, and vacancy rates of up to 50% have been reported.

Case Study: Bringing secondary retail back to life

- Using multiple spaces in a secondary location
- Working with a range of partners without compromising independence
- Building a diverse programme of activity

Coventry Artspace, acting as arts development team for Coventry City Council and working closely with the council's property team, have brought together a range of partners to manage a number of spaces in City Arcade. This is a covered space made up mainly of small units and sited at the edge of the city centre.

Visual arts projects were first to colonise the space, and these include the gallery space 'Unit One', the innovative public studio 'I Love Artspace Bursaries' project which has used two units and the curated Castle & Elephant gallery.

An earlier use of empty shops in City Arcade can be found, when 'Unit' exhibited six artists for two weeks in Summer 2008, bringing 500 visitors to the arcade.

As well as increasing footfall, these projects have generated national media coverage, including a Radio 4 magazine feature, and been recognized by regeneration journal New Start and arts publication 'a-n' as examples of innovation and best practice.

More recently, performing arts have found a home in City Arcade alongside the visual arts spaces. Theatre Absolute, founded in 1992 and led by writer Chris O'Connell and producer Julia Negus, have now occupied an empty fish and chip restaurant, to use as a small scale 'shop front theatre' based on a model used in the USA. The venue opened in December 09 with a rehearsed reading of Theatre Absolute's 'Car'.

'The Bubblechamber' is a project run by Mercurial Arts, primarily a dance company who make extensive use of new media and technology. They are using a large empty shop with a series of very different spaces for workshops, classes, multi-media installations and performances.

Both Theatre Absolute and Mercurial Arts are using their spaces to generate new productions – products which can be sold to a national market – at a far lower cost than if they were to take a traditional route and use rehearsal rooms, theatre space and a full-scale production.

Overall, the mix of projects, and additional short-term use of other units by groups such as the Scouts, has seen additional footfall driven to City Arcade and may have identified a long-term branding and mix of use for the space – creating an adaptable arts centre based in empty shops.



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Planning a project

3 Writing a plan

Planning a project is always a good way to spend your time, as the process of writing a plan should help you to understand why you're doing the project and the benefits it will bring to other people. If you're working inside an organisation your plan should talk to an audience both inside your organisation, and to possible partners outside, so avoid jargon and slang and use Plain English.

Useful link: www.plainenglish.co.uk

However many people have a passion for your project, it's best if one person leads on the writing so that it conveys a coherent idea and a clear message. But different areas of the plan may need expert input.

At this stage of the plan, it's best to plan the project without having one individual shop in mind, so you are flexible when spaces become available. You'll soon have a rough idea of the size of unit you need, and at that time you can ask shopkeepers with similar size premises to give you some idea of the costs involved. Once you've secured a shop, revisit the plan and budget and revise your ideas and costings.

Always be realistic about what you can do with the resources you have, and include options for different levels of resources and budget. Scrapping a project because you haven't secured the maximum amount of funding is a bit like throwing the baby out with the bathwater – if the project's really good, you'll find a way to make it happen.

A word of caution though - don't spend so long on this section of the toolkit that you're more involved with a plan than a project. Make this an adaptable document, and keep coming back to it when your information changes.

The need to be nimble is particularly true with empty shops, where things can change quickly; you need to plan ahead *and* be good at responding quickly to the unexpected (like finding the shop's full of rubbish, the roof leaks, or you're suddenly moved to a different unit than the one you expected!). If one person in an organisation has written the plan, they have enough of an overview to act as captain when needed – and can swing the biggest, most lumbering vessels around quickly when the wind changes direction.

So be ready to adapt to the space, embrace the temporary nature of the project and cope with a little bit of chaos if it comes. Remember as well that you may be required to leave at short notice, so make sure you have contingency plans for moving equipment, storing materials and keeping the project alive if you are temporarily homeless. Make sure everyone involved in the project knows about these plans, so that there are no surprises.

On the next page is a business plan checklist, written as a series of simple questions. Answer them and you have a short, practical business plan for your project. This will help you understand the project, keep the

project and the people you're working with moving forward, and make sure that you can explain in clear, concise and coherent terms what the project's about.

Business Plan Checklist

- What is the biggest aim of the project, and how does that fit with the aims of the organisations involved?
- Are there smaller elements within the project that need their own planning – workshops, classes, debates or meetings? Who will lead each of these elements?
- Why is an empty shop the right venue? Does the project need to be in the town or city centre, or would a location somewhere less visible be as good?
- How long will your project last – a day, a week or a month? How will you cope if that timetable is changed by, for example, the shop being let? Map out a timetable, with planning, the project and the evaluation included.
- What will it cost – think about the initial costs, and the day-to-day running costs? You can estimate utility bills by asking a nearby shop.
- How will you promote the project to get visitors, and can you use social media like, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter to support your work?
- Who will be the main organiser; are you working by yourself or as part of an organisation? What's the structure within an organisation to approve your plan, and how will that structure approve changes to the plan if a decision is needed quickly?
- Who are the possible partners who can help make your project a success, and lighten your load a little? Do you need formal documents to work with your partners, or just a friendly agreement? Consider that partners may take time to check things and approve them – how will this delay your project timetable?
- How will you manage the risks involved? (see our handy checklists in this guide)
- Where can you find funds – the local council, national funding bodies or local businesses? How will these funds be accessed, for example if they're only given when the project's completed how will you fund the running? How will different funding fit with your project's timetable?
- What resources do you need; display boards, paint, tables and chairs and so on?
- Why is your project good for a building – what does the landlord or letting agent get from it? Will you improve the look of the unit, clear rubbish left by previous occupiers, or carry out essential building work?
- How will you record and document your project, and how will you measure whether it's worked or not? Look at light and easy ways to create an archive, like www.bookleteer.com, and [possible homes for archives, like the local museum and library](#)
- What's the legacy – a booklet, an archive in an institution, a collection of podcasts online or a new partnership to run future projects?

Case Study: Making a convoy and changing direction

- Bringing together a range of partners
- Creating an agile and adaptable structure
- Maximising wifi and web 2.0

Nearly fifty local community groups, voluntary sector organizations and small charities: a wifi hub: art galleries, fairs and markets: an internet radio station and a wide range of hands-on activity, all in one empty carpet showroom for six weeks.

The UpMarket was the first time that Worthing Borough Council had used their property for a meanwhile project, and the 2000 square feet void space of a carpet showroom was initially going to be used for a 'Grand Charity Market' run by the local Lions Club.

In response to unexpected low footfall in the first week, a range of activity was planned and presented, with the whole project turned around in a matter of days. At the centre was the original charity market – used as a mechanism to give small organizations an easy-to-understand method of meeting the local community. As well as selling secondhand goods, the groups were encouraged to communicate their messages, recruit volunteers and find potential service users.

A local podcaster established a temporary recording studio, uploading a series of radio-style podcasts under the 'Empty Shops Radio' banner. Contributors to the project were interviewed alongside visitors to The UpMarket, giving further profile to the groups involved as well as collecting an oral history of the town centre and its shops.

The temporary event programme included meetings, an art fair, workshops, live music and a Scouts group's Christmas Fair. This mix of semi-permanent and changing activity ensured a wide, varied and changing audience were brought into the building. Footfall counts taken internally indicate that The UpMarket had over 12,000 visitors, increasing both footfall and dwell time in a secondary retail area.

The project was established by Worthing Lions Club and the Empty Shops Network, with the Lions leveraging a rates reduction and also a reduction in utility bills. The Empty Shops Network used funding from the local regeneration partnership for capital expenditure, including a mobile wifi hub to connect the project to the internet, as well as practical resources like cleaning equipment, tables and tablecloths, banners and catering equipment.

The two organisations developed a light, adaptable management structure to respond to problems and opportunities as they came up.

4. Managing Risk

Whether you're working directly for an organisation, by yourself or with partners you will need to look at the risks involved in your project. Organisations and partners may have very specific requirements for how you assess these risks, and may give you their standard 'Risk Assessment' forms. Don't worry – managing the risks and the health & safety requirements of a project is largely down to common sense and being careful without being overly cautious.

Break the risks down into three areas, and use these checklists for your own risk assessment:

Fire Safety

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Rubbish cleared away, other materials & resources safely stored
- Fire exits marked, routes to fire exits clear of obstructions
- Any alarms and equipment tested
- An evacuation plan in place, and all staff & volunteers informed

Health & Safety

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Public areas clean, tidy & free of hazards, for example trip hazards or stacked boxes
- Areas not to be used by public closed and clearly marked
- Electrics and any portable electrical items safe, visually checked for damage or broken cables
- Any specialist equipment only used by responsible staff & volunteers

Security

- Phone available to make emergency calls
- Windows shut & locked when premises not in use
- Doors locked & secured when premises not in use
- A safe, locked area available for private possessions like bags and coats

5. Planning a Budget

For your project to work, it needs to have a financial plan, which will help you make sure the funds you need are in place, and give you some outcomes to measure the success of the project. This will be vital if you're working within an organisation, with partners or if you seek funding, and you should check what level of detail about your budgets your organisation, partners or funders require as well.

Firstly, you'll need to write out what some rough figures for the cost of your empty shop project. At this stage it's a mix of making estimates and making enquiries. You'll need to know the rough size of the shop you hope to use, and a vague idea of the location will help as well.

Expect staff costs to be the highest percentage of your budget; and expect to spend at least 10% of the total on marketing and publicity.

Initial costs

Start with the initial expenses, the stuff you need to get the project up and running and get the doors open:

- materials to do the shop up – paint and polyfilla, brushes, sandpaper
- furniture, fixtures and fittings
- electrical items – a kettle, vacuum cleaner, portable heaters
- printed publicity – leaflets, posters, business cards
- signs, window vinyls and graphics, and an A-board
- a website domain, building a website
- media advertising, leaflet distribution

Ongoing costs

And add the stuff that your shop will use up once you're up and running, and work out a weekly or a monthly cost for these:

- business rates (more about these later!)
- utility bills; usually only electricity and water
- insurance cover

- tea, coffee and biscuits for staff
- toilet paper and soap
- window cleaner and cloths
- mobile phone calls
- pay-as-you-go broadband, whether it's a dongle or a wifi router
- website hosting
- media advertising, leaflet distribution

Utility supplies

In most shops water and electricity are still connected, as the landlord and letting agents need to use them. If they are, ask the landlord or their agent to keep a reading and charge you for what you use – this is much easier than transferring accounts for a short period of time. If they're not connected, you may have to factor in reconnection costs and be aware - there may be a minimum time for the contract to run, so you may have to keep paying after you've left. For short projects, it's easier to use mobile phones and mobile broadband than to have these connected, and a mobile wifi router which will let you run up to five laptops should be adequate for all but the largest projects.

Insurance cover

Insurance cover does not need to be complicated; most major insurers offer packages tailored to the needs of small businesses and shops, which are very affordable and can be set up with a phone call or online. These will cover your property against the public having an accident, break in or damage to windows and doors and so on. All insurance is about managing the risks, and the best idea is to ensure nothing needs to be claimed. Take a common sense approach to safety by watching out for hazards, and making sure everyone involved is aware of those hazards.

If you are working for an organisation, make sure that you keep within any health and safety guidelines that organisation has.

Staffing

Now work out the costs of staffing the project – starting with planning meetings, get-togethers and workshops, and then moving into running the project, opening the shop and writing up evaluation afterwards. Keep a record for all the staff involved. Even if you're planning to work on a voluntary basis – do start keeping a timesheet. It's useful information to know, especially if you decide to move onto a more professional basis later on – or to help another project to follow your model in the future.

Your Expenditure

Add all of your expenses from the categories above and you have a cost for the project. Add in some extra as a contingency against unexpected costs, at least 10% of the total. Within an organisation, check how you can purchase and pay for all of this. Do your organisation's procurement rules need to be considered when planning your project's timetable?

Your income

Now write up all the money that's coming in. This could include:

- funding or budget found within an organisation
- donations from the public
- people paying contributions to the project, like artists paying to hang work
- small amounts of sponsorship from local business, including donations of goods to support your project
- grant funding from local authorities, Arts Council England or from trusts and foundations. (See the end of this guide for more advice on funding!)

6. Understanding Business Rates

If you're occupying a building that's not domestic, you'll need to pay non-domestic rates, often called business rates. These apply to shops, offices, pubs, warehouses and factories. But there are some exceptions including:

- places of public religious worship
- most farmland and farm buildings
- public parks
- some types of property used by the disabled

Empty properties with a rateable value of less than £18,000 are exempt from business rates. Larger empty shops are exempt from business rates for a 'void period' of three months, after which landlords are eligible for full business rates. Once shops are in use, they are eligible for 100% business rates.

If you're operating as a business, you will be entitled to Small Business Rate Relief if you occupy only one property and its rateable value is below a certain threshold:

- £21,500 to £25,500 for properties in Greater London
- £15,000 to £18,000 for properties outside Greater London

This relief is on a sliding scale and can be up to 50% of business rates.

And local authorities have discretion to grant rate relief of up to 100% to not-for-profit organisations such as charities, local clubs or societies. Contact your local authority for more information.

Useful links:

Valuation Office Agency: find the rateable value of any property in England & Wales:

<http://www.voa.gov.uk/>

Business Link: includes a handy guide to business rates and how they work, updated as regulations change:

<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk>

Shop windows and business rates

Some projects in empty shops never open their doors; they either wrap the windows in vinyl, create something that is viewed through the window, or hang an exhibition in a way that it is seen without entering the shop. This kind of work does not usually involve paying business rates. Check what your local authority will allow. You may be able to:

- do anything as long as the door is shut and the public don't enter
- use a certain depth within the shop rate-free, for example, up to two metres from the window
- display anything that doesn't touch the floor; that is, it must be suspended from the ceiling or hung on the walls
- only attach materials directly to the shop windows

Case Study: Saving the landlord from business rates

- Multiple units in simultaneous occupation
- Arts organisation as managing agent
- Saving landlords from business rates

The Spacemakers Agency have developed from a series of meetings amongst artists, first forming the Spacemakers Network to explore new ways of using space particularly around the idea of a 'third place' between work and home.

A small group of associates from the network have formed the separate trading company The Spacemakers Agency, and this has effectively become the managing agent for three months for twenty properties at Brixton Village.

Originally called the Granville Arcade, this 1930s covered market is home to around 100 very small retail units. Although recently listed as part of Brixton Market, the arcade is in poor condition, with most units looking dated, shopfittings of poor quality, and the public spaces in a tired state. The site has been the subject of a recent planning application for demolition and redevelopment which met with fierce local opposition, and the future of this redevelopment now the building is listed is unclear.

In the meanwhile, owners LAP have employed the Spacemakers Agency, initially for a total sum of around £14,000, to manage twenty empty units and bring a range of arts, creative industries, retail and catering users to these units in a three month project. These are being offered rent-free for the first three months, with occupiers taking responsibility for any necessary refurbishment, as well as paying rates and utilities.

It is hoped that this will bring additional footfall into Brixton Village, and help establish new businesses alongside the existing traders, who are mostly serving distinct ethnic groups with food, fashion or household retail.

In addition, it relieves the landlord of the burden of business rates on empty properties and ensures the units will be partly refurbished, decorated and maintained in the short term.

7. Finding funding

Not all funds will match the project you're planning, so make sure to apply for funds that are suitable and work closely with funders whenever possible. When you're working with funders you'll have to work to a set time, provide a planned activity and usually monitor certain outcomes.

Funding for empty shop projects is new, so there aren't many dedicated funds available yet. You'll need to look carefully at what you're doing and how it can be funded from established sources. If you're working in a large organisation, you may have a funding officer who can help with this process.

Caution should always be taken in that the search, draw down and management of funds for a project does not outweigh the need for funds – and that the needs of funders don't change the nature of the project itself. Don't make funds the most important thing, and don't waste time chasing funds when finance may not be the barrier to getting the project going.

Public Funding

Funds from public organisations stem ultimately from central or local government. These funds will tend to be used to create economic outcomes such as new jobs created, land redeveloped or new businesses started. Those from artistic or cultural sources will wish to see audiences developed or new artworks created.

These are never simple funds to draw down and will generally require quite rigorous administration and accounting. For this reason it is always advised that smaller projects consider looking for funding only as a last resort, especially whilst public investment is reduced.

Public funds for local actions are many and varied, but generally fall into one of three categories:

- Enterprise development and entrepreneurial activities
- Community engagement to include job creation, job trials or intermediate labour
- Cultural activities, events and engagement

Largely, the first two categories are seeking economic impacts and are measured as such, although some community initiatives are far softer and require fewer or softer outcomes to be identified.

The final category often does not seek economic impacts but does still seek additionality – that is, to add something to what's already there.

National funding

Here's some funding that is especially for empty shops projects.

‘Looking after Our Town Centres’ – CLG through local authorities

107 local authorities will be able to make use of the £5.6m made available by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to find creative ways to reduce the negative impact empty shops are having on the high street.

Each council has received a grant of more than £52,000 to use as they see fit on ideas to boost town centres and transform empty shops into something useful such as a meeting place, a learning centre or a even a showroom for local artists. However, CLG has been unable to ringfence this money so individual authorities have considerable leeway in how they choose to use the funding. Two rounds of funding have been given so far, one in 2009 and another in 2010.

Link: www.communities.gov.uk

Arts Council England

Arts Council England can provide funds for arts-based initiatives through the 'Grants for the arts' scheme. Note that no funding stream is dedicated to empty shops projects, however. Contact your local office for more information.

Link: www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/regional-offices/

Link: www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/grants-arts/

Meanwhile Project, run by the Development Trust Association

The Development Trusts Association has drawn down some funds to assist a small number of projects.

Link: www.meanwhile.org.uk/

Enterprise development and entrepreneurial activities

Although you might not think of your idea as a business yet, some sources of finance may see it this way or see it as having potential.

Nationally and locally, Business Link operates as the public sector service for business support and for programmes aimed at helping people start a business or a social enterprise. The website offers loads of ideas, advice and experience. The service offers free start-up training, coaching and advice and can help you find local providers of specific support.

Link: www.businesslink.gov.uk

For those considered 'disadvantaged' in the labour market (normally meaning young people aged 16-25, older people aged over 50, those with a disability or those longer term unemployed), there's more assistance with starting a business, with the New Deal programme offering a long period of transition to actually coming of benefits, or else some small grants to assist the starting of the business.

Link: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/Jobseekers/programmesandservices/DG_173717

8. Getting In

It's not hard to get into an empty shop, especially if you lay good foundations. But start early as it can take a long time – and don't get hung up on one unit, keep your options open and talk to as many people as possible.

There are two people you need to work with to get access; the building's owner or landlord, and the manager or letting agent. But don't worry, if you have one on your side they can usually persuade the other.

And networking is the answer to getting them onside. You'll need to do this more than once; you'll need to do it regularly; in fact, you'll need to make it a normal part of your working week, at least until you're established.

You'll find estate agents, letting agents and building managers at business networking meetings. Use search engines to find business networking groups in your area, your area's branch of the Federation of Small Businesses, and your local Chamber of Commerce. Contact them, explain your plan and tell them about the benefits to local business. Because you've planned, you know what size shop you want, where it should be, and for how long. So be clear in what you ask for.

If you can't find networking meetings, contact your town centre manager, or economic development, business support or regeneration officers at your local council and ask for their advice – they should be able to point you in the direction of local business groups that are below your radar, or direct you to landlords and letting agents.

If you find a business group, ask for either five minutes to speak at a forthcoming meeting, or just to be able to attend a meeting as a guest. Turn up looking smart and professional. Make sure you have business cards ready with your name, phone number and email address.

If you have the chance to make a presentation, keep it short, sharp and focused on the problem, and your businesslike solution. Don't talk about the project itself, but about the benefits to the group you're making a presentation to. In short, answer the audience's only real question which is 'what's in it for me?'

You should also have a short introduction for when you talk to people one-to-one; you need to say in less than a minute what the problem is, how your project addresses it, and why that's a benefit to other businesses. Don't forget to talk to everyone, not just landlords and letting agents, as these meetings are full of useful, active people who can help your project come to life.

After attending networking meetings, keep business cards and make a note of any personal information on them – hobbies, interests and so on. You never know when you might need to call on that contact, so try to keep in touch with them by phone, email or by meeting occasionally for a coffee.

If you can't get into business meetings, it's time for another approach: find the shops you like. Don't think that every shop that's empty is to let; many empty shops are still let to a company that's not trading or has gone into administration, so won't be available. When you find ones that are note down the name on the estate agent's 'To Let' boards and visit their office.

Either give them your one-minute pitch, asking for an appointment later that week. Or just set up the meeting, and don't mention that you want a temporary lease and no rent until you've met them face to face! Again, be clear about the size of shop, area it should be in and the duration of the project.

9. Planning the space

Curating & Merchandising

When you're working on the high street, you've got to look good. High street retailers spend a lot of time, money and effort making their shops look good – you can achieve similar standards on a budget by being creative and thinking sideways.

Think carefully about how your space will work. A big, open space with large windows might make a great gallery space, but could be intimidating for visitors if you're running workshops and they feel they're being watched. Can you create multiple spaces in your shop – a quiet corner for meetings and workshops, a wider space for displaying art or artefacts, and an office area out the back?

In art terms, the process of putting the displays together in a space is called 'curating' – in retail, it's 'merchandising'. The basic rule is, choose a style and stick to it. Find furniture and objects that match, and treat the space as one big display. Or if you're going to 'zone' the interior – maybe a cafe area, a shop corner, a display space – use furniture and colours to make each area distinct. Shops like Ikea are great sources of affordable, funky furniture.

Even better than buying new furniture is recycling; embrace the temporary nature of the project and find furniture for free, using your local Freecycle group. Give it all a lick of paint – everything white looks stylish and professional, or if you fancy more fun try mis-matched primary colours. Then give it away on Freecycle when the project's finished.

Useful link: find your local Freecycle group: <http://www.freecycle.org.uk/groups/>

And don't forget to utilise furniture, fixtures and fittings you find in the space as well.

It's always possible to borrow equipment as well. Larger local stores may also be able to help with the loan of shopfittings, shelving and so on. And local community centres, charities and organisations might be able to loan you other things that you need. Museums might have display plinths and libraries may loan desktop display cases. If you have a clear plan and you know exactly what you need, it's easy to ask.

Remember to think about security. If you're displaying art or local history artefacts, can they be secured and can the staff in the space monitor them easily?

Signs & Legibility

Signs are important. Look at the shops around yours – they have invested in clear signs, corporate identities and clever displays to make it comfortable for customers to come in and spend money.

You may choose to spend money on custom-made shop signs or vinyl transfers for your shop windows. While a few lines of text are very affordable, larger full-colour and photographic designs can cost hundreds of pounds. So for short-term projects this might not always be economical. So be creative, and remember that a huge, homemade sign outside the venue may be more effective than an A4 poster in a window. Alternatively, many copy shops can enlarge an A4 black and white page to an A0 poster for just a few pounds.

One shop in the MLA-funded Living Places project wrapped their windows in brown parcel paper, to create a sense of excitement before they opened to the public. A fab idea!

Think as well about how art galleries use signage; when you walk into a room at Tate, it tells you what the room's about in big, clear letters.

Design clear signs explaining what the project is about. Again, enlarge it at a copy shop for legibility. If you use your signs to explain the temporary nature of the project, it can attract people to get involved in this or future projects; and it can calm nervous visitors who don't understand your project.

Case Study: Professional displays & exciting windows

- Created excitement with window displays
- Used professionally-designed displays
- Developed a clear visual identity

Taunton – Our Place, Your Place brought together partners working in regeneration, the arts and heritage to explore three stages in a town's life – the past, the present and the future.

Using a shop that was in an area of the town left behind by redevelopment and changing patterns of footfall, the project started with its windows wrapped in brown paper to hide what was happening inside. When the brown paper was torn down, it revealed a temporary museum, with professional displays created by the local museum's curators and design staff. A strong visual identity was applied throughout, following the brown paper theme and including an iconic British road sign.

Throughout six weeks, the venue hosted a range of events, initially exploring archives and heritage before moving to present-day life in the town and finishing with an exploration of the area's future regeneration. At every stage, the windows were used to maximum effect and a TV running in the window showing short films added movement and interest even outside opening hours.

Events included talks, presentations and drop in sessions with museum experts. The whole project also tied in with the BBC's 'History of the World' campaign, which saw a visit from Time Team presenter Mick Aston.

A particularly successful project was one to capture local memory, with people's personal photos scanned and copied on site and 'I remember...' slips completed by visitors. These memories and images, to be produced as a booklet, and a DVD of activity, will form a valuable legacy and an archive of local history.

10. Marketing

Marketing On A Budget

As with everything, although you're working fast and in a temporary space it's best to plan your marketing in advance. Again, time spent planning early will save lots of time and trouble later on. Get a big sheet of paper, draw up a calendar starting at least a month in advance of your project, and plot in your marketing activity week-by-week. Start your marketing as early as possible, particularly if you're working in an off the high street location where it will be harder to attract visitors. In these locations, good marketing really counts.

There should be three strands to your marketing; print, media and online. Use a different colour pen for each, or use columns on your plan. Cross each item off when it's been completed – it's satisfying to do!

Checklist

- Flyers
- Posters (adapted from flyers)
- Press Release
- Press email list
- Facebook group
- Twitter account

Making Print & Distributing Flyers

if you're lucky and work in an organisation, there's probably somebody who's responsible for your design and printing. Meet them early on in the project, and give them a clear brief. They'll need to know when and where the project is happening, in Plain English what it's about, who your audience will be and a clear deadline for everything to be delivered.

If you're working on a smaller project, it's not hard to design and print your own flyer. It can be a simple, black and white flyer photocopied at a local shop – or a full colour design, professionally printed. 5000 A6, postcard-sized flyers, printed both sides, should cost you around £100 and should be printed in about one week. If you don't have design skills or can't afford a graphic designer to do the job for you, use your creative skills and draw, collage or paint something. Photocopied collage always looks good, and has a punky urgency that matches the nature of many empty shops projects.

Flyers should be distributed through local shops and cafes. Don't forget your local Tourist Information Centre and your local museum, galleries or libraries. Ask them if they can distribute your leaflets internally to other branches or venues

If you have volunteers, get them dropping leaflets through letterboxes. And if you're lucky, local schools may

help out and send flyers home with their students. Stop and talk to people when delivering flyers, and they'll spread the word for you. Don't forget hairdressers and barbers, as they'll happily chat to a captive audience about what you're doing.

Make sure you distribute flyers about two weeks in advance, and top them up in the days before you open.

Don't forget to tell your neighbouring shops what's going on: drop a leaflet in to them, and ask them to display a poster or have flyers on their counter.

Press Releases

Consider using a professional agency to write and distribute press release for you; it's a great investment as it will return real results. If you have a local agency, you may be able to persuade them to come onboard with your project and work at a lower rate than they would for a commercial client.

If you're working in a large organisation, you will have a press officer to write and mail a press release for you; but if you learn to write a good press release, they'll be happy to be receiving all the information they need in the correct format for mailing out.

If you don't have somebody to do this it's easy to build a good list of email contacts in the local and regional media; buy newspapers, pick up free magazines, and scour websites for email addresses. Use resources like Twitter and Facebook to find direct routes to journalists as well, and start talking to them early about what you're planning.

Send your press release to local, community websites (who love to receive great content for their sites), arts & culture websites, and groups, clubs and societies in your area – they'll use it in their newsletters. Don't forget that most local councils have their own magazine or newspaper, although these might need information some months in advance, and that some councils will list community events on their websites as well.

Useful link: list your project at www.artistsandmakers.com/emptyshops

Here's how to write a punchy press release in seven simple steps:

1. At the top of your press release, include the name of your group or project, the date and the words 'Press Release' – journalists are busy so make it easy for them!
2. Then add an attention-grabbing headline – a maximum of half a dozen words is ideal. Think like a tabloid.
3. The first paragraph should be a short one (just one line is good) outlining the story in an interesting way. Use bold to make this stand out from the page and grab interest. If you don't get attention now, your press release will end up in the bin – or turned into a NIB, a 'News In Brief' piece at the side of the page.
4. Follow up with some background ...and then lead in to the story. Explain what's happening and why it's of interest to readers. Aim to write a press release that is between 300 - 400 words. Too short and it won't get good coverage: too long and it won't get read.
5. The press often like to have a quote – so restate the most important facts, as a quote from someone involved in your project. You want your contact details to be part of the story – so make sure to include them in a way that they're relevant to what's written before and don't get left out.
6. Make it clear where the story ends and that any following information is additional and for the press only. Using '/ends' is standard and easy to understand. Add your contact details and any 'Notes for Editors', like the background to a project, or a brief history of a venue.
7. Offer a good photo to match the story. It's best to both provide one yourself and also to offer press the chance to take their own. A good picture really makes your story stand out on the page. Offer interviews or live broadcast ideas for radio and TV.

Social Networking

For the first time in the history of humankind, we have the tools available to make networks of friends and colleagues – to bring together those who share common ideas, interests and aspirations – in real time, around the world and at low cost. These tools are really good for empty shops projects, where you need to be fast and flexible.

Social networking websites include names you're sure to be familiar with – Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and the older Friends Reunited. But there are many more, like photo-sharing website Flickr, teenage favourite Bebo and business site LinkdIn.

All of these let you build your own page to talk about what you do: and let people become your friends or followers to receive updates about what you're doing. They're usually free to use so they have a large number of users, putting you in touch with a large audience.

Pick the sites that best match the audience you want to reach, and the aims of your project. For example, if creating a photo resource is an aim, Flickr is a site you should be using. If you're about engaging with young people, use Bebo and MySpace. If your audience is a little older, in their 20s-40s, you'll probably find them on Facebook.

Now sign up with the site, which usually means adding some basic information. Spend some time building your page, adding content and inviting other people to sign up to your page. Don't wait until you have a shop secured and the project has started – get going as early as possible, so that you've built a buzz and excitement before you've even opened. Collect together friends, an audience, volunteers and potential ambassadors for your project.

Each site has very different tools, display options and ways of working so you'll need to take some real time in learning how to use them, and the only way to do this is to get stuck in. Most sites have friendly users who are happy to help a 'newbie' so don't be scared and remember - you won't break anything, and can always take down content you're not happy with at a later date.

As you get more involved, you should also check the etiquette of different sites – for example, Twitter users prefer informal, friendly conversation so don't just blast them with a sales message.

Useful link: Start by finding the Empty Shops Network at:

Twitter - <http://www.twitter.com/artistsmakers>

Facebook - <http://tinyurl.com/dm54dc>

Flickr - <http://www.flickr.com/groups/emptyshops/>

and find the MLA on Twitter: twitter.com/MLA_gov



Museums
Libraries &
Archives

Running & managing a project

11. When You're Open

Once you're in, you should check what you have available. While your plan should cover most problems, you may need to make some adjustments if your shop doesn't have everything you need. Don't worry – there's usually a quick and easy way to get around problems. For example, if you don't have running water can you ask another shop nearby, and carry water in camping containers (these should cost less than £5 each). Here's a checklist for once you're through the door.

- Doors lock, keys
- Windows safe
- Toilet accessible and working
- Running water, sink or kitchen area
- Lights working and visually appear safe
- Telephone and broadband
- Heating working, controls explained

To make the most of opening your empty shop, you'll want to:

- Engage with people when they visit
- Capture information from them for future contact
- Get feedback on your work

Choosing set opening times, and displaying them clearly in the window, is vital. It's better to advertise you are open for less hours, and get the highest number of visitors in the shortest time. Make sure you find out about local events – like a farmers' market or an arts festival – when visitor number to the area may be higher, and open to match. Use the social media you've signed up with to let people know when you're open. Make this a regular reminder, as you'll catch different people online on different days.

On the days you're open, use signs on street corners to direct people your way. Find out if there are any sites nearby where you can legally hang a temporary banner or signpost. And if you can display an A-board, put one out in a prominent location.

Make your venue stand out from other in the street: bunting, flags, or balloons tell people exactly where you are and are like an urban shorthand that says something exciting is happening. You'll notice that many potential visitors are worried about entering your space, especially if it's not immediately clear what you're doing: make them feel comfortable by putting up a sign to say you are open, and if possible leaving the front door open wide.

Once visitors are in, try to make them feel welcome without being too pushy. It's a fine balance, but a polite 'hello, look around and I'm here if you have any questions' always works. And it should be obvious – but

remember to smile! It's all about engaging with visitors. Don't ignore people when they come in; don't huddle with friends in deep conversation; don't bury your head in a book; don't eat food at your shop counter.

Keeping a rough count of visitors is a good idea, and provides some valuable information for your evaluation. Keep a day to day count, or for more detail monitor mornings and afternoons separately. If you have huge numbers of visitors or you're open for weeks on end, it may not be possible to count everyone in and out. Count visitors for an hour a day, multiply by the number of hours you're open and use this to estimate footfall.

Even better than just counting is starting a real relationship with your visitors. Try to collect details from them to build your own mailing list with a simple 'sign up for our list' form.

Use a visitor's book as well, near the door, to capture comments from visitors as they're leaving. Or be inspired – a big board, sticky notes and a pen are an equally good, and far more visually exciting, way to encourage feedback. Ever visited the Turner Prize at Tate Britain? They have a whole room with floor-to-ceiling hooks for people to leave comments!

While collecting information is vital, particularly if you're working for, with or funded by an organisation that wants certain data collected, don't let this compromise the friendly and informal nature of your empty shops project.

And make sure that visitors can take away your details too, by giving them postcards, business cards or a simple leaflet. Include all the ways they can contact you – with your Facebook address, Twitter name, email and phone number shown clearly. If there are future events they might like, make sure they are given details of those before they leave.

Finally, try to get good-quality photos of your visitors at busy times, that you can upload to Facebook and Flickr. And put a sign up asking them to upload their images to your Facebook page and Flickr group as well.

12. Useful equipment

Based on ten years of running projects in empty shops, here are some top tips for essential empty shops equipment:

Tables: Folding pasting tables are ideal, as unlike larger commercial trestle tables they will fold in half and fit into the boot of a normal car. Don't buy cheap wooden ones – they'll fall apart far too quickly. Professional painters and decorators use high-quality, metal framed pasting tables and the most stylish ones look really good as well as being firm and sturdy to work on. They should cost around £35-£50 each.

Seats: Pasting tables can be higher than normal tables, so look at bar stools for use when working at them. There are plenty of folding or stacking seats available as well, and it's worth having enough to accommodate guests. One Scandanavian furniture shop stock a really useful plastic bucket-shaped stool, comfortable and easy to stack in a corner, for less than £5.

Heaters: Empty shops seem to be universally cold. Electric fan heaters that cost £15-£35 are fast and effective, but they do add to the electricity bill. You know how shops always have a heater over the door? It creates a warm air curtain to stop cold air coming in – and it works. So put one heater near the door.

Wifi: There's a gadget called a 'mi-fi' which is about the size of a mobile phone. It connects to mobile broadband, and then acts as a wifi router for up to five laptops or other devices. It's ideal for creating temporary wifi hotspots in empty shops and provides a reliable, robust connection. It will cost about £50, and it's pay-as-you-go so you'll need to top it up.

Tablecloths: Using fabric softens a space, gets rid of nasty echoes and hides clutter. Single bed sheets are about the right size for covering trestle or pasting tables. Buy a load in one colour so your space looks coordinated.

Toolkit: You'll need a few tools, and with this useful kit you should be able to pull off that Mary Poppins trick and look prepared for any emergency. You don't need anything specialist, just a claw hammer, pliers, scissors, a couple of screwdrivers and a staple gun. Add gaffer tape, masking tape, nylon fishing wire, small tacks or nails, drawing pins and staples and you're ready. Blue tack, bulldog clips and dressmaking pins are also useful for displaying things. The whole kit will cost less than £50.

13. Packing up

When you've finished, you need to make sure you'll be invited back by the landlord or letting agent and that means filling a few black sacks, getting the polyfilla out, and having a good scrub up.

First clear everything you've brought into the shop, and make sure you have black sacks to clear any rubbish. Of course – separate your recycling. If there's anything that you don't need that might be useful to someone else, pass it on. Use landfill as a last alternative.

Spend some time with a tube of fast-drying filler, and fill any holes you've made in the walls. Repaint or touch up the paintwork.

Any shopfittings should be left neat and tidy for the next user. Leave furniture neatly to one side, and leave shelf-brackets and other fittings neatly stacked.

If you got anything you got from Freegle, consider putting it back on Freegle for someone else to use.

Borrow or bring a vacuum cleaner from home, and make sure you clean under shop counters as well as the obvious spaces. Wipe down surfaces, and if necessary clean windows. If there are kitchen areas, make sure they are clean and if there's a toilet, clean it and leave enough toilet paper for the next person.

Make sure you show the landlord or letting agent the space before you return the keys, so there's no future dispute about the condition when you left. If you've made improvements, make sure they know. And make sure they get a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers – it ensures they will remember you, and leaves some goodwill for the next project.



Museums
Libraries &
Archives

Evaluation & follow up

14. Evaluation & Documentation

Just because you've packed up and locked the door, it doesn't mean your project is over. You need to evaluate and document your project; for your own satisfaction, to show people when you're planning your next project, and to add to the nationwide empty shops map. If you're working within an organisation, there will be set evaluation you have to complete and if you have worked with project partners or received funding, you may need to provide them with certain evidence and evaluation as well.

As with everything else to do with empty shops, don't make your personal evaluation complicated, and keep it light-touch. Enjoy the process of recording the good work you've done.

On one side of A4, write down how many people were involved in your project; as exhibitors or contributors, as volunteers, and how many people visited while you were open. Note down any organisations or businesses who were involved, funded or supported the project.

Record your actual project budget: what everything cost, and what money came in. match this against the estimates in your plan. They won't be exactly the same, but unless there were major changes or big unexpected problems should be close.

List any key media coverage, with a note of date and the author, including local newspapers, national press, TV and radio, and of course any blogs or websites which wrote about your project. It's always worth keeping copies, but remember you can't photocopy press cuttings or scan them to put online without a licence.

Keep as many photographs as possible, ideally starting with an empty shop, through the setting up, to a full and busy space with people in it, and then an empty shop again.

Write down any comments, from exhibitors, contributors, visitors, neighbouring shops, that stand out – record the negatives as well as the favourable ones, as these are may well be more useful and help you learn lessons for next time.

And write your own thoughts and feelings down; what worked, and what didn't? Why did some things swing while others were stuck in a rut? Was the project too long, or too short? When was the highpoint, and what was the low?

Keep all of this in a portfolio or folder, to refer to when planning future projects.

Don't forget to ask a local library or museum if they are able to keep an archive about your project, with flyers and posters, photos, press cutting and your evaluation. If you have any creative responses to your project, such as a podcast or film, include copies on CD.

Apply to the Meanwhile Project and ask them to showcase your project at www.meanwhile.org.uk/

And contact the national Empty Shops Network at www.artistsandmakers.com/emptyshops to add your project to their growing archive.

Case Study: When temporary becomes permanent

- Artists as co-operative
- Site-specific group exhibitions
- Developing careers

Managed by a small, informal co-operative made up of artists, the ConTemporary Gallery took on premises on short-term licences, typically while new tenants were being found, and used them to curate group exhibitions which mixed site-specific work alongside a showcase of existing work.

For an exhibition in Hove's old Post Office, this included sculpture made from postage stamps, work in situ on existing shop counters, and film projections in the building's basement and vaults which were inspired by the spaces themselves.

In The Argus building, the basement of the former newspaper office housed paintings, sculpture and film alongside an installation of printed material in the pit left when the printing presses were removed.

These relatively small-scale shows highlighted the need for exhibition space in the city, while giving local artists and makers the chance to either showcase existing work or respond to a live brief to create new work. Each show was funded by the artists sharing costs.

By engaging artists to work alongside each other, create new work, and plan and curate exhibitions, the ConTemporary Gallery was able to deliver informal but highly effective professional development and many of the artists involved have used the skills learnt to strengthen their careers.

The project's founder now runs an arts and interiors boutique in Saltaire as a full-time business.

Appendix: Further support

15. Support

National organisations using and supporting empty shops

There are a range of national organisations which can give practical advice, support and help the development of individual projects. Some of these specialise in projects in empty shops, while some are experienced at using such spaces as part of their work.

Empty Shops Network

The Empty Shops Network provides an online listing of empty shop projects across the UK, keeps them in touch with each other using an email list to send occasional bulletins, and use an email discussion group to encourage conversation, collaboration and crossover. It also produces practical resources, like this Empty Shops Toolkit for the MLA.

The network acts as a central point of contact and has handled enquiries from national media, as well as individual artists, arts organisations and local authorities. It has also acted as advocate for the sector in discussions with the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG), the Meanwhile Project and local authorities.

Link: <http://www.artistsandmakers.com/emptyshops>

MLA

Leading strategically, the MLA promotes best practice in museums, libraries and archives, to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all.

The organisation is sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Launched in April 2000 as the strategic body working with and for the museums, archives and libraries sector, it taps into the potential for collaboration between them and has recently run pilot projects in empty shops, as well as producing this Empty Shops Toolkit.

Link: <http://www.mla.gov.uk>

The Meanwhile Project

The Meanwhile Project is run by the Development Trusts Association, arising from the 'Looking After Our Town Centres' guide produced the Department of Communities and Local Government. It will look to find and support 'meanwhile' use of empty commercial buildings during the recession.

Currently in an 'explore, develop and test' phase, there are some flexible funds to get some imaginative community uses into empty shops as beacons. The organisation has helped CLG to produce a range of meanwhile leases, suitable for empty shops, buildings and even redundant land.

Link: <http://meanwhile.org.uk> or <http://meanwhilespace.ning.com/>

Development Trusts Association

The Development Trusts Association is the leading network of community enterprise practitioners and helps people set up development trusts - as well as helping existing development trusts learn from each other and work effectively.

Link: <http://www.dta.org.uk/>

ATU

The Asset Transfer Unit is run by the Development Trusts Association, working with Community Matters and the Local Government Association, and it is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The Asset Transfer Unit helps local people and organisations to transform land and buildings into vibrant community spaces. It provides expert advice, guidance and support concerning the transfer of under-used land and buildings from the public sector to community ownership and management - helping organisations to develop those assets and deliver long-term social, economic and environmental benefits.

Link: <http://atu.org.uk/>

a-n the Artists Information Company

a-n's publications and programmes are designed to meet the professional needs of artists and the visual arts sector, identifying changing trends and new needs. Founded in 1980, a-n the Artists Information Company is acknowledged as a leading UK agency supporting the practice of visual and applied artists, and is perhaps best known for producing a-n magazine and the sister website. It is behind a membership scheme for practicing artists which includes insurance cover as a key benefit.

a-n the Artists Information Company is supporting the long-term work of the Empty Shops Network.

Link: <http://www.a-n.co.uk>

Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for the arts in England, distributing public money from the Government and the National Lottery. Contact your local office for more information.

Link: www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/regional-offices/