

Meanwhile Use

Benefits to Occupiers

'Meanwhile use' is the temporary use of vacant buildings or land for a socially beneficial purpose until such a time that they can be brought back into commercial use again. It makes practical use of the 'pauses' in property processes, giving the space over to uses that can contribute to quality of life and better places whilst the search for a commercial use is ongoing.

As leader of the Meanwhile Project, the Development Trusts Association (DTA) commissioned SQW Consulting in April 2010 to research the nature and extent of 'meanwhile use' in the UK today and to prepare a business case for this activity. This document has extracted these findings to highlight the specific benefits to occupiers to support proposals for use.

The full document and wider information on the Meanwhile Project is available at www.meanwhile.org.uk



The benefits of meanwhile use

Meanwhile projects have begun to spring up around the UK, offering an array of services and uses in a diverse range and size of spaces. From 'pop-up shops' on struggling high streets to community organising space in back-offices through to the greening of or community growing on becalmed building sites, it is clear that meanwhile use represents a very flexible response to short-term opportunities.

Drawing on our consultations with property owners and communities alike, including some in-depth case studies, we have sought to define the benefits of engaging in meanwhile use for:

Community groups and occupiers

The principal occupiers of meanwhile spaces are small, local charities, community groups or social enterprises who want to make use of low cost (or no cost) space to promote their aims. There are many advantages to meanwhile use for such groups:

- **Low cost, low commitment space** – For community groups with few resources there are obvious benefits of being able to use space for a few months (or even a few years) at low cost and without a commitment to a long term lease. For groups looking to get established or evolving quickly, short term space can be ideal.
- **High profile space** – For some projects – like arts or cultural activities or ethical shops – where profile matters, being able to use a vacant shop unit in a busy shopping street can provide high visibility that they would simply not be able to afford otherwise. This can also improve the chances of generating an income for these organisations and helping them to establish themselves on a more secure financial footing. Nicola Greenan of the LS14 Trust in Leeds commented that the meanwhile use '*...has given the Trust the ability to start generating an income and has increased its chance of survival*'.
- **Space for innovation and growth** – A short term space can also provide the chance for a group to try out something new and pilot a service or an activity with relatively low costs and commitment, enabling an informal demand assessment to inform a subsequent case for the activity becoming permanent. The examples below illustrate this. The first example shows how a charity promoting social enterprise in Cambridge was able to use a former bank building in the city centre to pilot the stepping up of its activities. The second example tells how meanwhile use provided the

breakthrough required for a new visitor attraction in Scarborough, which has been able to secure greater funding since.

Table: Examples of innovation and growth...

Beginspace, Cambridge: Social enterprise in a former bank...

Beginspace has allowed City Life to promote themselves within the city and to test new models of business support. This is likely to enhance future projects: for example, they are planning on having drop-in business support within a new multi purpose centre currently under development. They have also learned simple elements, such as the success of providing coffee to put people at ease and engage them in a substantial conversation. They also learned that the informal setting, due to the limitations in terms of furnishing, created a beneficial relaxed atmosphere.

City Life will shortly be making a presentation to Regional Cities East, to explain the model for Beginspace, as they believe that this kind of short-term drop-in centre could be reproduced in other cities.

Maritime Heritage Centre, Scarborough: Breakthrough for a new attraction...

In November 2009, the new Scarborough Maritime Heritage Centre opened for the first time, in a former shop building on one of the main streets leading to the town's harbour. The Trust that runs it had tried for years to attract support for the idea but had struggled to attract funding without demonstrating the demand for it. The ability to pilot the idea in a low-cost meanwhile arrangement has provided the breakthrough they were looking for. They were given advice and some modest up-front financial support from the Meanwhile Project, to help them get started.

Since opening they have secured a regular flow of visitors and have now received:

- A £20k grant towards their archiving work and £1k from the Major's fund
- Donations of further artefacts expanding their collection by 10-20%

The project is now looking to build momentum and secure the support for a permanent centre. Lindy Rowland from the Centre commented:

"The process was really straightforward. Once we got the funding and got the keys we were open within 10 days!"

For community groups, issues of concern can centre on the potential complexity and risks of taking on a lease, sometimes for the first time. However, the experience shows that for most the process is relatively straightforward and quick with arrangements often put in place within a few weeks. The availability of expert help from such organisations as Meanwhile Space can also help a lot. The potential for ongoing support from DTA can help the meanwhile use lead to longer term community asset ownership, as in Seacroft.

Costs, risks and issues

Clearly, the process of establishing meanwhile use does entail some costs, as already noted:

- For occupiers, the use of premises usually entails some running costs – utility bills, insurance, basic maintenance and sometimes adaption of the space for temporary use – but these are usually significant lower than any commercial arrangement.

The savings that accrue to each stakeholder in both the short term and long term makes meanwhile use a viable and intelligent option in many circumstances.