

Empty Spaces in Lambeth

A guide for potential temporary occupiers of vacant premises

September 2009

The Council is committed to helping local businesses and town centres lead us out of the recession.

The recent downturn in the national economy has had a big impact on the retail sector, leading to increased numbers of empty commercial properties. In Lambeth, this is particularly marked in the Norwood and Streatham areas. There is a long history of artists and community groups making creative use of these empty spaces.

There has been broad interest in Lambeth in making temporary use of these vacant retail spaces for creative, cultural and community purposes. This guidance has been prepared by Lambeth Council for potential occupiers of empty premises. A separate guide is available for landlords and property agents.

Why use empty shops?

The wider benefits of bringing empty shops into temporary, creative uses are well established.

Vacant properties have a very negative impact on our town centres. Visitors and shoppers can be discouraged from return visits, the look and feel of the town centre is one of decline, the retail offer is weakened and investment stagnates.

For artists and community groups, empty shops can provide an excellent opportunity to gain access to spaces and locations that would otherwise not be available or affordable.

Possible uses

Art

Many artists have expressed an interest in making temporary use of empty shops. This is an excellent opportunity for artists' work to reach a greater and different audience than might otherwise be possible.

It also presents an opportunity to enrich town centres with new cultural activity, drawing people back into neglected areas.

Community Groups

Voluntary and community groups could make use of empty spaces in town centres to offer new services or opportunities for community interaction. This can be beneficial for the community by bringing together volunteers and visitors in a new environment.

Test Trading

Many aspiring entrepreneurs or young businesses want opportunities to sell their goods or services in commercial premises, without the cost or commitment of setting up a permanent shop. Empty premises can provide a fantastic opportunity for these businesses and promote new economic activity in the surrounding neighbourhood.

Education and Health

Public and voluntary sector organisations could make temporary use of empty premises for projects promoting health and wellbeing or offering learning opportunities to the community. However, temporary spaces might not be suitable for all uses where there is the possibility of having to withdraw a service or activity at short notice.

For more information contact:

Chris Norris, Enterprise Officer
Business Growth and Enterprise
London Borough of Lambeth
cnorris@lambeth.gov.uk
020 7926 7165

Issues to consider

Finding properties

In Streatham, an encouraging pilot project is currently underway where a chartered surveyor has been appointed to identify and engage with local commercial landlords. The result has been to obtain feedback and maintain interest in the future development of Streatham High Road and to identify opportunities to make use of specific vacant properties.

The Council is unable to maintain a full list of vacant properties, but if you want to hear from landlords interested in making properties available for projects in Lambeth, please get in touch (see 'Next Steps' below). There are also a number of websites where landlords and occupiers can be matched:

meanwhitespace.ning.com
spacemakers.ning.com
www.artistsandmakers.com
www.creativespaceagency.co.uk

If you have a particular property in mind but don't know who owns it, you can perform a search with the Land Registry online for £4:

www.landregistry.gov.uk

Leases

A lease is a private legal agreement between the owner of the property and the prospective occupier, and Lambeth Council does not intend to act as an intermediary in this arrangement.

Landlords might want to consider offering flexible terms in leases to encourage vacant premises back into use. In return, occupiers will need to appreciate that they might need to move on from temporary premises at relatively short notice where a longer term occupant is found.

Landlords will need to be assured that there is a proper legal basis for any temporary uses, business rates liabilities are confirmed, the property will be kept in good condition and that they will be able to take the empty premises back as soon as there is a prospect of a commercial letting. Other landlord considerations include who covers ongoing maintenance costs i.e. security, utilities, disbursements insurance and other related costs.

The Government has provided funding through the Meanwhile Project (www.meanwhile.org.uk) for solicitors to create a standard 'meanwhile lease' that landlords and occupiers can use free of charge. This should be available for use in September 2009.

Business Rates

National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) or Business Rates are set by the Government but collected by local authorities.

There is an 80% reduction available for charitable organisations. Generally, this means that the organisation must be registered with the Charities Commission. Some organisations such as churches and education institutions do not need to register in order to qualify.

www.lambeth.gov.uk/businessrates
020 8315 2255

Planning

Temporary uses of vacant premises may require planning consents, so whilst there is agreement from a landlord for a temporary use by a local community or arts group, change of use will be a key consideration.

Lambeth Planning will provide advice on a site by site basis.

www.lambeth.gov.uk/planning
020 7926 1180
tpac@lambeth.gov.uk

Advertising

Vacant shop fronts can be used for posters giving information on local attractions and amenities, or to display community artwork. This would not require planning permission, but may need advertisement consent – there are various exemptions. Regulations also grants a general consent for advertisements on hoardings which enclose land on which building operations are taking place and those operations are in accordance with a planning permission where the development is primarily for business or commercial purposes. There are other stipulations including height, size and an advertisement cannot be displayed for more than three years.

Sources of Funding

You should consider where you will source funding to pay for costs associated with the above issues, as well as other running costs associated with your project.

The Government has not made any funding available to Lambeth as part of their package of support for projects in empty spaces, as vacancy rates are not above the average for England. Limited funding may be available through grants for specific projects through the Arts Council for England, but this would need to be supported by other sources of income.

Another source of funding is from local sponsorship voluntary organisations, businesses and individuals. The Apollo Project (see below) was successful in part due to the generosity of neighbouring local businesses through both financial and in-kind donations.

Case Studies

A number of models for making use of empty commercial premises are emerging in London and elsewhere.

Apollo Project – Herne Hill

In June 2009 the former Apollo Video Store in Herne Hill was home to a creative festival of art, film, music and performance provided by local talent and high profile artists.

The project was driven by local residents with backing from the Herne Hill Traders Association. The scheme's success was based on a number of factors, including a good relationship with the landlord and support from dozens of volunteers. Ultimately, the project has brought the local community together and created momentum for future initiatives.

www.liveattheapollo.org



Pop-up Shops – Camden Town Unlimited

This initiative is led by Camden Town Unlimited (a business improvement district) and makes use of two empty shop units located close to Camden Town underground station. The shops provide a temporary trading opportunity under the tagline 'a new creative space for Camden'. Occupants to date have included fashion students and local artists.



Bigger Picture Gallery – Crystal Palace

The Bigger Picture Gallery makes use of an otherwise vacant shop to provide exhibition space for a number of local artists.



Checklist

1. What are the aims of your project, and what would you want to use a space for?
2. Temporary occupiers may be expected to pay a sliding scale of rental costs i.e. from nil to close to market rent. What rental costs are you able to afford?
3. What other costs have you considered and how much can you contribute?
4. Is there suitable empty space in the right location?
5. Can you identify the landlord, and are they willing to let you use the space? What conditions are there?
6. What will be the costs associated with using the space (e.g. business rates, rent, utilities, costs of fitting out) and who will be responsible for them?
7. What sources of funding are available to you?
8. Do you need planning or licensing consent?
9. What will happen at the end of the project?

Next Steps

For more information or to register your interest in using an empty shop on a temporary basis, please contact:

Chris Norris, Enterprise Officer
Business Growth and Enterprise
London Borough of Lambeth
cnorris@lambeth.gov.uk
020 7926 7165

With your consent, we will supply this information to local property agents and landlords seeking temporary tenants.

We would also recommend registering for the online discussion forum at **www.meanwhile.org.uk** to talk to other interested parties nationally and regionally.

Disclaimer

Whilst Lambeth Council is keen to see vacant shops used by a range of community and arts based organisations to improve the look and feel of our town centres, it is expected tenants will seek supplementary advice to avail themselves of any liabilities arising as a result of this initiative.

This guidance note does not constitute an offer of financial support from Lambeth Council.