

Using Empty Spaces

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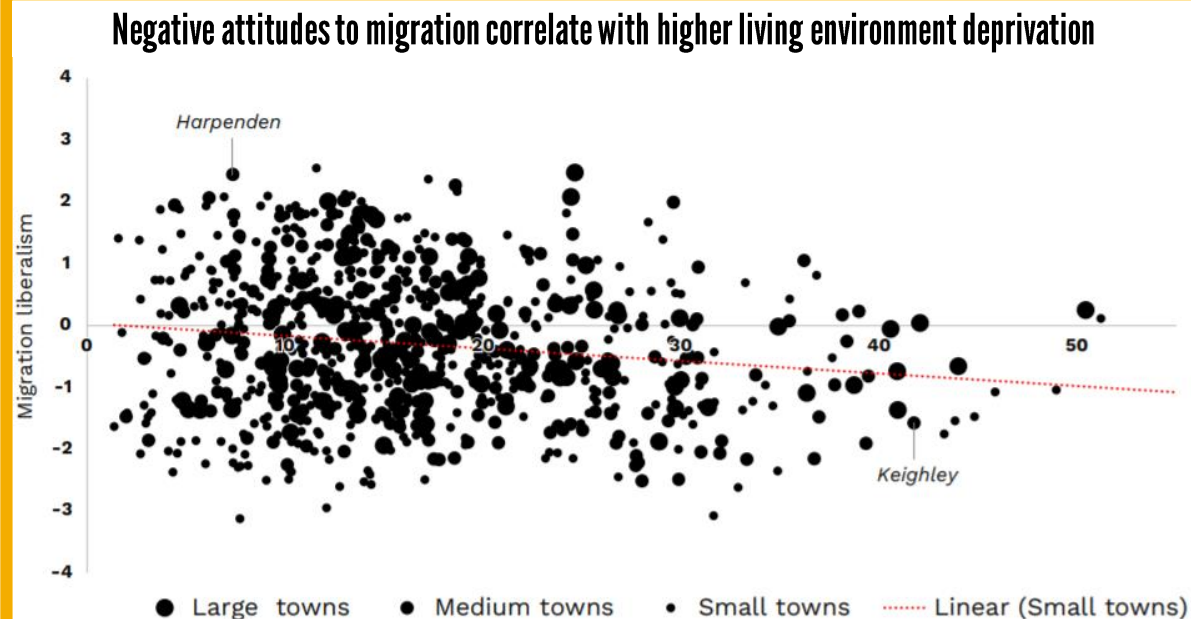
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Why empty spaces affect resilience

Economic decline destabilises community resilience, creating resentments which the far right can exploit. A crumbling public realm often acts as a lightning rod for anxieties about jobs or opportunities. It can form a visible emblem of loss, making it easier for those who wish to sow division to blame outsiders. This applies whether it's a row of shops falling into disuse, a pub closing, or an iconic retailer shutting its local branch. Now more than ever this is a 'live issue', as a result of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the high street.

“For many, the most visible signs of diminishing community spirit are the loss of pubs and social clubs, post offices, and local bakers or butchers, and their replacement with take away outlets, nail painting bars...or boarded up outlets that no one wants to rent” – LGA



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How this guide helps

Who this guide is for

This guide is designed for two audiences:

1. **Cohesion officers and community teams at local authorities**, especially those in areas facing decline on the high street or a fraying public realm
2. **Potential occupiers of empty spaces**, including charities, start-ups, arts organisations and community groups

In certain instances, guidance is relevant to one audience but not the other. We have put advice which is specific to communities teams at councils in **green** boxes, and guidance for potential occupiers of spaces in **purple** boxes.

By finding creative uses for empty spaces, community stakeholders can:

- a) **Tackle decline narratives**, and thus remove some of the root causes that feed hostility to change and difference
- b) **Strengthen the social fabric**, creating social capital and community wellbeing

This toolkit is for those working to unite communities and reduce tensions, as well as for local groups who want to improve their areas. It is primarily for audiences who are not experts in this field of policy, but who can see its relevance to their work and want to understand it better.

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Temporary and permanent spaces

There is a sliding scale, when it comes to the use of empty spaces. At one end are ultra-temporary solutions, based on rent-free occupation. These aim simply to fill a space on a stop-gap basis. Here you might find ‘meanwhile’ usage of shopfronts. At the other end of the spectrum are permanent solutions, which repurpose disused buildings and bring them into community ownership – or which rethink the existential role of town centres.

For example...

- Pop-up uses for private shops between lettings
- Short-term usage of council spaces (e.g. during regen)

For example...

- Secure tenancies at ‘sub-market’ rates for ‘experiential’ use
- Discretionary rate relief by the council, to enable community use

For example...

- Purchase of private assets through crowd-funding
- Asset transfer by a local authority, for ‘nil’ consideration

Temporary



Permanent

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Meanwhile usage

Finding temporary use for buildings can avoid empty frontage during tenancy gaps, and offer spaces for positive community action. For example, if an out-of-town museum is putting on a temporary exhibition, they could pay peppercorn rent and use an empty shop as town centre ticket office. This fulfils key aspects of the resilience remit, reducing perceptions of decline, unlocking the positive energy of the community and creating a virtuous commercial cycle. But it is also hard to sustain, as most users of a space need more a secure set-up in the longer-term.

The box to the right features ideas for types of temporary usage, and the next page shows some of the considerations.

Potential short term uses

- Temporary ticket office** – e.g. for a one off sports event, a festival or a museum exhibition
- Venue** – e.g. gigs from a local music college, or a market-place for a young people's business exchange
- Installation** – e.g. a project by a local arts organisation, a film viewing or an escape room
- Information hub** – e.g. a charity or community group doing outreach or a makeshift tourist information centre
- Shop floor** – e.g. a pop-up restaurant or a temporary shop for a fashion start-up

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Perspectives on meanwhile usage

From a local government, community resilience perspective, temporary approaches work. They fulfil a core aim, which is to reduce the sense of decline in an area. If your council can identify a pipeline of 'meanwhile' uses – either with assets teams at the council or with private landlords – then you should do so. However, it's worth bearing in mind that this relies on an 'easy come, easy go' stock of small organisations, who are happy to take spaces on at short notice, and to give them up when paying tenants come along. The risk is that voluntary organisations feel 'used', by an approach that benefits retail landlords. One way of making this work is by identifying local organisations, such as art, music, cooking or fashion colleges, who are happy to seize opportunities as they emerge.

Local government

Potential occupiers

For community organisations, temporary spaces are useful. They will often be available for free, and allow 'no strings attached' experimentation. The problem is you'll usually want to turn your idea into something longer-term. So think about ways of doing this, such as by discussing sub-market rental opportunities, if the event which you want to use the space for goes well. It is also worth considering why buildings are empty in the first place – and whether they work for your needs. An empty shopfront on a fairly busy high street could be perfect if you're setting up an installation, but is more likely to run the risk of being filled quickly. An empty shop on a precinct in a residential area may work better if you're trying something slightly longer-term, like a temporary community centre or summer school.

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Making the most of meanwhile usage

Temporary solutions work best if...

- ❑ A pipeline or directory of those looking to fill space is developed (ideal parties to work with include those like colleges, which are producing regular cultural or commercial output without seeking to expand/ grow)
- ❑ Channels of communication between private landlords and the council are as clear as they can be, so that opportunities are flagged early and the council knows who spaces belongs to
- ❑ Communities teams are aware of council-owned assets which may be available – e.g. during a stop-gap prior to a regen project starting
- ❑ Agreements are in place, so that users of the space are given basic security and know the minimum time they have access to a building
- ❑ The council helps with capacity questions, like health and safety or insurance, and there is clarity about how you can and can't use a space
- ❑ The commercial case for using empty spaces to create virtuous circles is made to retail landlords
- ❑ Organisations which feed explicitly into resilience – e.g. a community group or an interfaith charity – are encouraged to make use of empty spaces (as well as start-ups, pop-ups etc)

Short term solutions are not going to fundamentally change the success of a high street. But they can be part of the answer, creating a more vibrant local economy and challenging perceptions of decline.

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Case Study: Hartlepool Empty Shop

In 2018 the arts organisation Empty Shop were commissioned to work with the local council and combined authority, alongside the Northern School of Art, on a project in Hartlepool's Church Street. Part-funded by the Great Place Tees Valley programme, this aimed to run a pop-up events space in an empty shop, in an area which had seen significant economic decline.

The space was opened up, under the name The ConTemporary, and the first step was to engage the community. This was done via an 'open door' policy to interested passers-by. People were encouraged to come in and experiment in low pressure ways, such as by drawing on the walls. This introduced the idea to the public, and helped to stimulate ideas.



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Case Study: Hartlepool Empty Shop (cont)

Over 30 events were eventually run using the space. These included free exhibitions, plays and gigs, and involved everyone from street artists to heritage organisations to local looked-after children – with different sections of the community becoming involved over time. Having been commissioned for 10 weeks, the ConTemporary ended up staying open for 5 months. As part of the project legacy, Empty Shop subsequently worked with local young people on skills and professional development.

Empty Shop took on practical elements, like admin, DIY and insurance – freeing up the community to experiment. This model, based on bringing in an expert partner, is one way of overcoming the capacity challenges which come with empty spaces.



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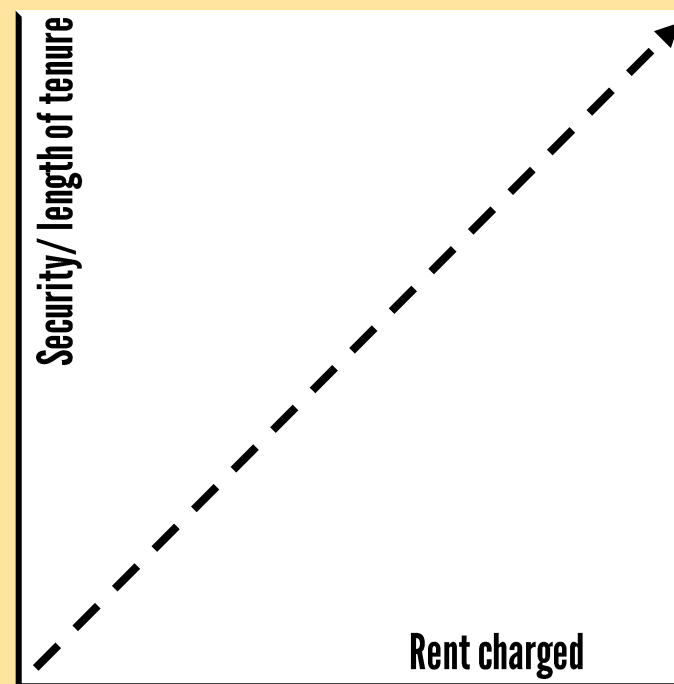
Sub-market rental

Ventures which require longer-term security will struggle to find it without paying rent of some kind. Even if a building is unlikely to be filled, landlords will want to keep their options open, in case a paying renter emerges. The same applies to public sector landlords (although this is changing). Hence, it is rarer for community or arts groups to access empty spaces free-of-charge for very long periods.

However, there are ways in which space can be rented for below the market rate. If councils take certain steps they can encourage this, fostering a commercial environment which cultivates community projects and recognises the potential of fresh ideas.

Rent and security

When it comes to rental arrangements, there is a direct trade-off between duration spent in the venue and level of cost



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Opportunities for sub-market rental

Potential occupiers

One option for smaller and more experimental businesses is **turnover dependent rent**. The tenant pays a percentage of their turnover rather than a fixed monthly or annual fee to their landlord. Models of **sub-market rent** like this are still rare, but are becoming more common.

Other options include negotiating break clauses which only tenants can activate, or tapered tenancies where rent increases gradually.

Sub-market rent is becoming more common, as landlords start to recognise that having properties full will improve the commercial attractiveness of the area in the long term.

There are certain steps which can be taken, to enable sub-market rental options. The boxes on either side highlight some of the options available to potential occupiers and councils, respectively.

Local government

Social value linked leases are a new idea, whereby companies pay public sector landlords in kind, on the basis of 'social value' definitions set by local government. Several London Boroughs have these types of leases in place.

Councils can also provide **limited discretionary business rate relief**, to encourage private landlords to rent their spaces to certain types of pro-social organisation.

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Making the case for sub-market options

The argument for sub-market rent options

- ❑ The impact of globalisation online shopping and out of town retail parks has made the traditional high street model less sustainable
- ❑ In deprived places, where rapid high street decline is taking place, there is less and less demand for retail units
- ❑ Seeking to rent out buildings on lengthy, market rate tenancies does not make sense in this context – they will simply sit empty
- ❑ One way to strengthen high streets in the long term is to get the community using retail spaces again, for whatever purpose they can, so as to stimulate footfall and create passing trade
- ❑ Landlords need to be open to start-ups, not-for-profits and ‘experiential’ tenants, who can demonstrate the potential of these shops and buildings, and strengthen the ‘social fabric’ in town centres
- ❑ Sub-market-rate options – which are flexible in price and duration, and which support businesses to grow – are the best way of doing this
- ❑ Through sub-market options, landlords can take a more entrepreneurial approach, which seeks to reverse patterns of decline and make the buildings they own more commercially sustainable

A big part of sub-market rent is simply about making the case for it. The box to the left sets out the argument for public and private sector landlords in deprived areas taking more creative approaches to how they rent their property.

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Longer-term ownership

Ownership of a space is the desired end-point for many community groups, arts organisations and start-ups. It is an extremely slow process, and involves finding up-front revenue. But the rewards can be large, with long term community assets created.

There is a slight distinction here between not-for-profit organisations (charities, social enterprises etc) and commercial ventures (start-ups, escape rooms, pop-up restaurants etc). The former have various legal routes open to them, whereas the latter are simply operating in the open market.

Routes to ownership

There are two means by which the local ownership of a space might come about:

1. A **government agency** transfers an asset to a charity, arts or community group
2. A **private landlord** sells an asset to a charity, arts or community group

The former could sometimes take place for below the market rate – if there is a strong social purpose to a project – and will occasionally be transferred for free (‘nil consideration’), if the council doesn’t want the asset.

The latter will generally go the highest bidder.

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Routes to ownership

Provisions in the 2011 Localism Act

Assets of Community Value (ACVs) are local buildings and spaces which the community or voluntary sector nominates. The council then decides whether to accept this nomination, based on whether the asset fulfils the ACV criteria (e.g. that it carries social value). Typically, the argument for ‘community value’ is easiest to make on the basis of past usage. Former swimming pools, pubs or libraries are more likely to be listed than retail spaces or office buildings. But there are exceptions.

Once they have approved the nomination then the asset becomes subject to **Community Right to Bid**, and is listed as an ACV for 5 years. This means that, if the asset is up for sale, local groups have a 6 month window to raise funds, prior to it being sold on the open market. Some councils are more proactive than others, and have developed registers of assets suitable to become ACVs.

Source: [MyCommunity](#)

Solutions based on ownership represent a different direction – moving town centres away from the retail model altogether, and towards community purchases of privately and publicly owned spaces.

The Localism Act (see box to the left) provides routes by which community groups, charities and parish councils can do this – effectively giving non-commercial bidders a head-start.

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Community purchases

Potential occupiers

Ways of raising funds to purchase an asset

Community Share Offer (or Withdrawable Share Capital): *Withdrawable shares that cannot be sold, traded or transferred between members, which are bought from investors as a form of collective loan*

Community Ownership Fund: *A central government fund which community groups can bid for, based on 1:1 match-funding. There is a steady funding stream, based on multiple rounds over 3-4 years. It could be used, for example, to develop a building that's been transferred to the community. The key test is whether the building is at risk of being lost.*

Crowd-funder: *Raising small amounts of capital from a large number of individuals*

Business sponsor: *Identification of a commercial partner with an interest in supporting the community, to match-fund or seed-fund an idea*

If a jewel of the high street or an old municipal building is bought by the community, it can act as a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the area, leading to a better networked local community. The box to the left shows some of the approaches to funding a community purchase.

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Changing the purpose of high streets

A wider argument is that high streets should pivot away from retail, and that decision-makers should redesign town centres as hubs for community mixing, socialising and sharing.

This is the case made in the Grimsey Review (see box to the right). Whether councils accept this proscription in full, there are clearly steps, beyond specific asset transfers, which can be made in this direction. These ideas have resilience and cohesion at their core. They are based on councils providing spaces where people can meet and come together – such as provision of seating or heating in a public square.

About 'The Grimsey Review'

Authored by retailer Bill Grimsey, the 2013 Grimsey Review was an alternative prospectus for a post-retail high street. Its recommendations included an acceptance that “bricks and mortar retailing can no longer be the anchor to create thriving high streets and town centres.”

The report suggested that policy-makers “repopulate high streets and town centres as community hubs,” and “prepare for a ‘wired town’ vision of ‘networked high streets’, that puts libraries and other public spaces at the centre of each community.”

Reference: [The Grimsey Review](#)

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Case Study: Bradford Mirror Pool



In 2003, as part of the city's masterplan to boost cohesion, perceptions and civic pride, the Bradford Mirror Pool was identified as a flagship project. Conceived as part of a wider Bradford City Park initiative, its intention was: to create a 'glue' for the city centre; to facilitate a space for events and gatherings; to alter perceptions, putting Bradford 'on the map'; to offer a cross-cultural meeting place which brought people together; and to attract tourism and investment.

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Case Study: Bradford Mirror Pool (cont)



Following engagement with communities and young people, construction began in 2009, on the site of a former traffic interchange in the city centre. The Mirror Pool was completed in 2012, and is now a focal point, hosting large public events and attracting inward investment in the process. The project is clearly immense in scale, and is hard to replicate in the age of slimmed-down budgets. But it represents a long-term philosophy about the role of town centres, which has smaller applications elsewhere.

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Public and private

Generally, publicly owned assets are often more suitable for longer term ownership options, whereas engagement with private retail landlords can work best for more temporary ideas. The matrix below is for potential occupiers, and helps to explain why this is.

Private sector landlords	<p>Higher priority</p> <p>Most empty retail units are privately owned. Using them as meanwhile spaces is mutually beneficial and low risk for both parties – if the owners can be reached.</p>	<p>Medium priority</p> <p>Private landlords may increasingly be open to sub-market options. But finding those who are and opening a dialogue may still be tricky.</p>	<p>Medium priority</p> <p>Community purchases can be slower and come up against more resistance if the properties are commercially-owned. It may also be harder to prove ‘social value’ if you’re looking to register a building as an ACV.</p>
Public sector landlords	<p>Lower priority</p> <p>Because there are less publicly owned spaces (especially in areas with high footfall) they are not always the best place to start if you are looking for something very short-term.</p>	<p>Medium priority</p> <p>Public bodies are more likely to see the value of sub-market tenancies. But they own fewer of them. And whether they do still dependent on the council’s priorities and policies.</p>	<p>Higher priority</p> <p>Councils do not have a profit motive, and will want to work to support partners. For long-term projects the assets they own – e.g. sizable municipal buildings – are often the most suitable.</p>
	Short-term (e.g. meanwhile usage)	Medium-term (e.g. sub-market renting)	Long-term (e.g. community ownership)

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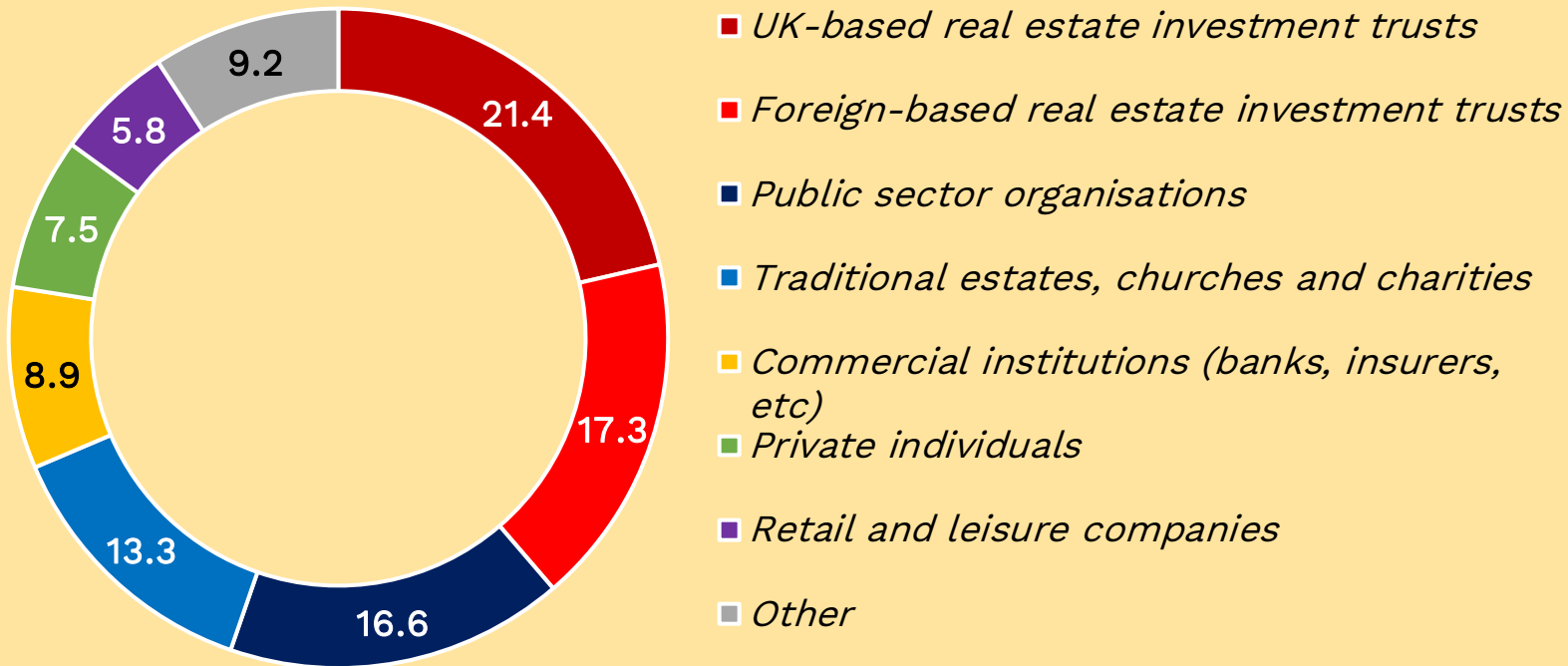


Who owns the high street?

A key element in making these sorts of decisions is to work out who owners are. This takes time, but for those who want to fulfil the potential of the high street, this preliminary work will be worth it. The more councils are able to fill in the gaps, the more they can support community groups in doing this.

Make-up of property owners on UK high streets

There are likely to be plenty of regional variations, with foreign owners more common in larger cities. But the proportions below point to the rough breakdown across most UK high streets.



Source: *EGI, 2019*

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Engaging around public sector spaces

It can be hard to know who to approach at the council. This applies whether you're in a group from outside the organisation, or work for the authority in a different department. Names of departments may vary from council to council, but the three key teams tend to be the following:

- ❑ **The regen team**, who'll be thinking about opportunities to drive growth
- ❑ **The estates/ assets team**, who oversee the list of buildings and spaces the council owns
- ❑ **The voluntary/ community team** (especially if linked to heritage and arts), who will know about groups that might want to use spaces

Transferring public assets

Transferring a council asset for below market rate can be a good option. It hands it from an organisation that may not have the time to make the most of it to one that does. However, authorities must bear in mind that community groups will often have lower levels of capacity when it comes to admin and upkeep. Good councils will support groups with scoping an opportunity. Equally, community groups need to be aware of how challenging it can be to take over a dilapidated building. The worst case scenario is that asset transfers are made as a way of jettisoning spaces which do not have genuine social value.

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Vacancy rates by ownership

Vacancy rates by different types of ownership

Type of owner	Vacancy rate	Overall ownership rate	Ownership of vacant units
Investment management schemes	13.0%	5.8%	9.6%
Institutions (insurance, banking and pension funds)	11.9%	8.9%	13.5%
Overseas investor(s)	9.6%	17.3%	21.2%
UK REITS & Propcos	9.2%	21.4%	25.0%
Other	9.1%	3.9%	4.5%
Traditional estates, church & charity organisations	6.8%	13.3%	11.5%
Retail & leisure occupiers	5.7%	5.3%	3.8%
Public Sector	4.5%	16.6%	9.6%
Private individual(s)	1.3%	7.5%	1.3%

Source: *Power to Change, 2021*

The matrix to the left is taken from research by Power To Change. It sets out in detail the vacancy rates across different types of ownership model.

It shows that a relatively large number of buildings are public sector owned, but that a proportionally quite small number are vacant.

In practical terms this means that private sector owners are more willing to leave shops and offices empty. Attempts to challenge high street decline need to go beyond municipal spaces, and look at finding uses for these buildings.

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Understanding the private rental sector

Accessing spaces which are owned by private renters will often involve prior research. HM Land Registry is an important tool in doing this research.

A huge part of the challenge is that commercial landlords overseeing disused space are not usually based locally – and are often situated outside the UK. They tend to be very large REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts) with a portfolio of shops cross the country. Hence, paying for a disused space in a relatively cheap part of the UK is a cost they can absorb.

The land registry

Using HM Land Registry allows you to identify who owns a building. It can be done for a small fee – around £3 for each property enquiry – and you need to register (although councils may already have an account).

The information provided is often very basic, and requires further detective work. But it's a good place to start, whether you're a community organisation looking at a building that's sitting empty, or a council looking to create a longer list of property owners.

Reference: [HM Land Registry](#)

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Local context

Local context matters to these considerations. Table 1 shows the areas with the most pub closures since 2001. Closures may relate to lifestyle changes and demographic shifts as well as to economic decline. But their affect on the neighbourhood can be high damaging, signifying the loss of community.

As we can see, there is a mix of two types of place: urban authorities, where pubs have often been developed into housing, and ex-industrial places facing economic decline, where they have fallen into disuse. Because the latter are areas that face a range of other social issues, they are especially vulnerable to decline narratives – and to resulting tensions. The use of empty spaces in these types of community is especially important.

Table 1) Local authorities with the highest number of pub closures, 2001-18

1	Newham
2	Barking and Dagenham
3	Luton
4	Hyndburn
5	Slough
6	Enfield
7	Waltham Forest
8	Sandwell
9	Burnley
10	Torfaen
11	Rochdale
12	Dudley
13	Croydon
14	Walsall
15	Barnet
16	Stoke-on-Trent
17	Haringey
18	Blackburn with Darwen
19	Rushmoor
20	Rossendale

Source: ONS

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Areas facing long-term decline

Table 2) Local authorities with the steepest fall in high street retail jobs, 2015-18

1	Melton
2	Mid Suffolk
3	East Cambridgeshire
4	Blaby
5	Chesterfield
6	North West Leicestershire
7	Northampton
8	Rutland
9	Babergh
10	East Lindsey
11	Fareham
12	Nuneaton and Bedworth
13	North Somerset
14	South Kesteven
15	Woking
16	Harborough
17	Leicester
18	Hinckley and Bosworth
19	Sedgemoor
20	Fenland

Source: ONS

Table 2 shows declines in retail. Different types of authorities feature, but it again includes many areas that have seen long-term economic loss.

The difference between the empty spaces context in areas facing economic decline and that in commercial hubs comes down to supply and demand. Rates and costs in the former are lower, and this means there is less pressure on private landlords to find tenants. Units can sit empty for longer, and groups may have to work harder to access commercial spaces.

Conversely, because assets are worth less money, landlords in ex-industrial places are generally more willing to transfer or sell them to the community if they see a chance to do so.

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Conclusion

Checklist

- A knowledge of who to speak to at the authority about council-owned assets
- An understanding of who owns private rental units in your area
- Awareness of community, voluntary, heritage, business and arts groups who may want to use spaces temporarily
- A grasp of Community Asset Transfer legislation and rules – and of the different ‘sub-market’ rental options
- Practical admin and upkeep support for local groups taking on assets

How do you stimulate pride in the public realm, if you’re operating against a backdrop of economic decline? How can grass roots arts projects or strategic initiatives by the authority help to make a difference?

These everyday questions about living environment relate directly to cohesion and resilience – determining how hostile to change the community is and whether the far right can get a purchase.

The Checklist to the left shows some of the things to get in place, if you’re looking at ways of making better use of empty spaces in your community.

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External links and resources

These external links and resources are particularly useful for thinking about more temporary opportunities, but have many applications beyond this.

Below are a number of organisations and initiatives working in this space, which it is useful to be aware of:

- [Empty Shop](#)
- [Plymouth Culture](#)
- [Nudge Community Projects](#)
- [East Street Arts](#)
- [Urban Foundry](#)
- [We Made That](#)
- [Meanwhile Space CIC](#)
- [Pop-up Wales](#)
- [More Than Meanwhile](#)

Below are various toolkits, resources, guidelines and other forms of support. These should help you to understand this area in more detail.

- [Dealing with Empty Shops](#), LGA
- [The SUARTS Exhibition Toolkit](#), UAL Students Union
- [High Street Renaissance](#), Arts Council
- [Meanwhile use leases and guidance for landlords](#), MHCLG
- [Meanwhile Foundation toolkit](#), resource page
- [Community resource page](#), Public Practice
- [Pop-up Good Practice Guides](#), Urban Foundry
- [‘How the high street was hit by the pandemic – look up your area’](#), FT (£)

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With thanks to **Nick Plumb**, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at Power to Change



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