

Meanwhile Use

Benefits to The Wider Public

'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 the wider public to support proposals for use by Local Authorities.

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:

The Wider public

There is evidence of benefits from meanwhile uses accruing to the wider community, neighbouring properties, future generations and society more generally. These benefits fall into a number of categories:

- **Maintaining vibrancy** – bringing an empty property back into use can help to maintain levels of activity on a street, including the number of pedestrians, which can have a direct benefit to neighbouring shops and offices.
- **Improving visual attractiveness** – refurbishing or reusing premises or land usually results in improving its aesthetic appeal, benefiting the quality of life for local residents. As one council officer confirms:

"It does help to brighten up areas, especially where there are lots of empty shops..." (Michael Hambridge, Hastings Borough Council)

- **Attracting visitors and investors** – a new use, particularly if it is retail, leisure or cultural, can be quite eye-catching and can raise the profile of the premises or site itself, bringing new visitors to that place and even investors. Sometimes a meanwhile use can accelerate the search for a new commercial user for a building.
- **Preventing area blight or decline** – where a concentration of premises fall out of use, the collective impact on an area can be quite serious, sometimes attracting crime and vandalism. Maintaining active use can deter problems like this and help to manage areas that have suffered in the recession, until more permanent solutions can be found.
- **Making community services more accessible** – many of the community groups that take up meanwhile use are providing services – e.g. learning, debt advice, counselling, business start up

support – to their local community and such use can allow them to provide these services in more accessible places. This can raise the profile and take up of their services.

- **Strengthening the third sector** – providing cheap and low commitment space for small local groups can provide a boost for the local third sector, helping to unlock local innovation and creativity and enabling the development and growth of community groups. The opportunities that are developed can also help to strengthen working relationships and local partnerships between third sector, public sector and private sector. As one group in Leeds reminds us, they exist to benefit others:

'Meanwhile use has given the Trust a base to operate from and to demonstrate they have a role to play in the community...it gives small organisations the opportunity to work within communities and to have a social and economic impact on an area' (Nicola Greenan, LS14 Trust)

- **Promoting wildlife and green space** – temporary building sites can represent a surprising asset for local wildlife as well as open green space, making for more attractive spaces.

All of these benefits are to the advantage not just of the occupiers or the property owners but neighbouring properties, the local council and the wider community. The modest costs of meanwhile use can sometimes help to prevent more serious urban problems developing, which may cost significantly more to manage in the long term. The types of wider benefits that can be delivered are illustrated with these examples:

- The *Bradford Urban Garden* is promoting biodiversity and promoting environmental education and has attracted interest from local businesses looking to support it, and the Royal Horticultural Society nationally.
- The *Coventry Canal Basin Warehouse* has been used as a meanwhile space since 1980, providing studios and workspace for artists, makers and small start up creative businesses
- The *Peoples Supermarket Camden* has established a community supermarket that is owned, run by and serves local people, selling local produce.
- The *Music Mentoring Scheme* in Bradford offers the opportunity for local young people excluded from school to develop skills and confidence through music.

Costs, risks and issues

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

- For councils, the waiving of empty property business rates entails a modest loss of revenue in the short term, but the wider 'place benefits' should outweigh this. The national system of business rates at present contains some disincentives for local authorities to engage in meanwhile use, which would benefit from review.

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.