



OPEN DOORS

PILOT PROGRAMME REPORT

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Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government



meanwhile
SPACE

INTRODUCTION

Open Doors was a one-year pilot scheme matching landlords struggling to find tenants for empty properties with community groups looking for space.

Planning for Open Doors began in Autumn 2018. At that time, 11.3% of high street shops across Great Britain were vacant. High vacancy can contribute to social costs such as crime, unemployment and social isolation; successful high streets can help build strong communities. The Open Doors scheme was designed to test whether a model of meanwhile use could enable landlords and communities to transform empty shops into vibrant community hubs.

The overall objectives of the pilot were to:

- Support community groups to deliver much-needed services to young adults and older people who are at greater risk of suffering from loneliness
- Raise the profile of community uses on high streets
- Increase footfall in high streets and town centres
- Help to build socially and economically stronger communities
- Encourage meanwhile use to help support landlords struggling to cover business rates, utility bills and other costs
- Provide new uses for empty properties on high streets

Five empty properties were selected to take part. The sites were in Fenton (Stoke-on-Trent), Bradford, Kettering, Slough and Rochford.

The pilot was monitored and evaluated to help inform future government policy and funding decisions.



HOW IT WORKED

PARTNERS

Open Doors was launched by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in partnership with Meanwhile Foundation, a charitable organisation supporting the meanwhile use sector for the benefit of local communities. Day-to-day delivery was overseen by Meanwhile Space, a meanwhile operator with over ten years experience and the CIC of which Meanwhile Foundation is the charitable organisation. The partners worked closely with local authorities, landlords and other stakeholders.

Meanwhile Use Leases were negotiated with each of the five landlords, and held on behalf of the community groups by Meanwhile Foundation. The community groups signed Licences to Occupy with Meanwhile Foundation.

The Open Doors programme recompensed landlords for their building insurance costs. The programme itself was covered by Meanwhile Foundation's charity insurance policy. All community groups were required to have public liability insurance in place to cover their own activities.

Meanwhile Space project managers oversaw day-to-day running of the sites, responsible for maintenance, security, finance, communications, legals and user applications. A freelance project assistant was recruited at each location to provide on-site support and local knowledge and engagement.

The spaces were designed to be as self-managed as possible to reduce the burden on running costs and to encourage a sense of shared responsibility and ownership. Community groups received a site induction

before using any of the spaces, to show them how everything worked and to instruct them in health and safety procedures. This information was also issued in a space manual they could keep for reference. They all had their own keys and opened up and locked the units themselves every time they used them. They were expected to keep the spaces clean and tidy and to respect the needs of other users.

SITE SET-UP

The scheme was opened up to landlords across England, whether a local authority or other public body, a small business owner or a major property portfolio-holder. An invitation for landlords to apply was issued by MHCLG in November 2018 setting out the financial and social benefits of taking part. Benefits included the chance to make a difference to the local community (and thereby enhancing the reputation of the participating landlord), improving the quality of the space, increasing the likelihood of a commercial tenancy through contributing to a more vibrant local area, and providing security against squatting and unauthorised entry. Landlords were asked to offer their spaces rent-free for one year and, in return, Open Doors would cover upkeep, utilities and business rates, and fund initial fit-out costs of up to £25,000.

Interested landlords or their agents were asked to submit an application providing information about the property and local area, and to attach photos and a floorplan where available. The applications were assessed against a set of criteria as outlined in the invitation:

- **Strategic fit:** spaces should be able to help meet the objectives of the project
- **Location:** there had to be a good

BEFORE



Fenton Open Doors, before and after external refurbishment. Open Doors rejuvenated shop frontages to bring colour and vibrancy to high streets. Vinyls gave the project a visual identity and provided information for passers by. *Meanwhile Space/Caitlin Mogridge Photography*

AFTER



Kettering Open Doors, before and after internal refurbishment. Previous interiors were stripped out and any necessary remedials completed before redecorating and furnishing the spaces in a bright and welcoming style. *© Meanwhile Space/Mike Massaro*



- **Area:** this should demonstrate above-average vacancy rates and need
- **Duration:** spaces should ideally be available for a minimum of 12 months from spring 2019, although a 6 months lease was considered too
- **Size:** spaces should ideally be a maximum of 1,000 sq ft
- **Clean up and fit-out:** spaces should require no more than £25,000 to be spent on ensuring the space is fit for use

Following this assessment a shortlist was compiled of sites to be visited by a Meanwhile Space project manager. During these visits, information was recorded in a more detailed checklist, split into the categories Owner Analysis, Location Analysis, Analysis of the Physical Property, Heads of Terms, and Set-up and Running Costs. The analysis of the physical property was the lengthiest category, and included questions related to planning class, condition, statutory compliance, services, security, fire safety, internet FTTC. Once the five sites had been selected, and legals completed, Meanwhile Space organised any necessary remedials to ensure the space was ready to be use by local groups and

individuals. This included:

- Fire risk assessments were commissioned and fire safety equipment was serviced.
- Services - internet, waste removal, plant maintenance, pest control, cleaning - were installed.
- Kitchens were kitted out with a full range of crockery and utensils.
- Each space was simply refurbished to deliver a bright, approachable and positive space with plants, comfy chairs, tables and lockers.
- A design studio, Studio ND, was commissioned to deliver a design identity and space branding which included large graphic vinyls for the walls and facades of the units - creating a welcoming, attractive space and allowing for the incorporation of text introducing the project.

COMMUNITY

Use of Open Doors space was offered free of charge to individuals and organisations for community-orientated activities. Through the programme, they were given the opportunity to test their ideas, deliver their projects and bring positive social change to their high street.

Information about Open Doors and the application process was made available on the Meanwhile Foundation website. Through this website, a form could be submitted to express interest in using one of the spaces. The application process remained open throughout the year and incoming proposals were reviewed within 2-3 weeks of submission.

Selected applicants would then be contacted by a Meanwhile Space representative to discuss their idea in further detail and review suitability based on the conditions of use. These included:

- activities or services had to be accessible to anyone in the community and therefore offered highly discounted or free of charge
- proposals could not be religious or political in nature

- activities had to be conducted in compliance with any relevant regulations (such as DBS checks)
- proposals couldn't compete with nearby businesses
- applicants had to share the space with other users and therefore weren't allowed to leave their items in the space

Applicants were also given an opportunity to discuss the types of activities they planned for the space, their reasons for applying to the programme, what they hoped to achieve, the viability of their proposal and their connection to the local area. They were asked to describe their space requirements, as the lay-out and size of rooms could not accommodate all activities - for example, sports.

During the call, Meanwhile Space talked through the Open Doors programme, explaining its goals, the expectation that users take part in any evaluation activities, and users' responsibilities to the space and other groups.

If a decision was made to proceed with the application, a timeslot was agreed. Generally a weekly timeslot was offered, although more frequent or occasional uses were also permitted. Meanwhile Space was then able to draft a license for the applicant and arrange a space induction with the project assistant locally.

A sense of community among site users was encouraged through monthly meetings, whatsapp groups and open days which showcased their activities to the wider area. The users were encouraged to raise any issues and ideas - whether necessary maintenance, a security concern, or an idea for making the space more comfortable or accessible - with the Meanwhile Space team.

A Facebook page was created for each site to communicate with local residents and organisations, and was regularly updated by

OPEN DOOR VOICES: THE USER Home Start Slough

Home-Start Slough was one of the first groups to join Open Doors Slough and made sure that Wednesdays were filled with creativity, fun and laughter. Established in 1996 to provide help and support to parents finding family life difficult, Home-Start Slough provides families with a trained volunteer, who will visit them in their own homes for a few hours a week. Open Doors allowed them to bring their services to the high street. "Our core audience is in central Slough – the people we are most trying to help and reach out to - so were very excited about the prospect of a centrally located space with no charges associated with it."

Through their 'STAY and PLAY' sessions where they continue to work with and empower parents in a caring way; by being a friend and a listening ear. "We decided to run a weekly drop-in session for any parents who were in need of help and advice, or any families needing a 'safe space' or a bit of respite. We ran Lego-building activities, storytelling and offered crafts & colouring."

It proved hugely popular and Home-Start Slough was able to connect with more families by being in a central location. "A mum came in and disclosed that she was the victim of domestic violence, so we were quickly able to get her the information she needed about where to go for support in Slough, and how to keep herself and her little boy safe. Being so centrally located, we really were 'in the right place at the right time'."



Home Start Slough at Open Doors, 2019
Meanwhile Space/Mike Massaro

the local project assistants and user groups. Local press opportunities were pursued to raise awareness of the project within the community, often in collaboration with local authorities. Progress was monitored throughout by the project partners. Meanwhile Space provided monthly written reports to MHCLG. The two teams also held an interim fortnightly group call until community groups had entered all spaces, at which stage the frequency of the calls was reduced to monthly.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The social and marketing research agency IFF Research was contracted to provide an evaluation of the programme, addressing the following points:

- Whether the original aims of the repurposed premises for the landlords and space occupants have been achieved and what drivers/factors have led to these results.
- The wider costs and benefits of the pilot project to participants and stakeholders; for example such as Local Authorities(LA); in terms of the economic and social costs and benefits of this model over a counterfactual alternative (if the property remained vacant or repurposed using PDR for another use).
- The processes which helped or hindered these results and any remaining systemic issues or barriers which could impact on future success of this type of intervention if rolled out elsewhere.
- Policy implications of the results for expanding the scope or scale of this type of intervention based on the emerging results.

IFF Research conducted fieldwork at each of the five locations to interview landlords, community groups and local businesses. They also interviewed landlords and community groups who had been unsuccessful in their applications as a counterfactual exercise. Online surveys were sent to each community group to

measure how they were using the spaces, once a month or two into the group's tenancy, and again towards the end of their tenancy in May 2020. IFF Research collected their findings and recommendations into the 'Open Doors Pilot Programme – Evaluation report', published by MHCLG in June 2020.

Meanwhile Space also conducted impact assessments as part of their standard operating procedures. Landlords, partners and user groups were surveyed for feedback on the pilot. They were asked how well Open Doors had served their needs, what benefits or disbenefits they had experienced, and how far it had enabled them to contribute to wider social and economic goals. Planned street intercepts to understand how the project was perceived in the wider community had to be abandoned due to Covid-19.

FUNDING

Open Doors was funded by MHCLG. There was a combined project budget of £420,000. Of this, £380,000 was managed through Meanwhile Foundation. £40,000 was managed through MHCLG Integration and Communities Analysis Division.

The terms of the grant were set out in funding agreements between MHCLG and Meanwhile Foundation. These included details of reporting and auditing requirements.

Of the total project budget, £125,000 was allocated to the set up costs and £150,000 was allocated to the running costs (£2,500 per month for each space) for the spaces. There is a underspend on this budget due to careful management of set-up and running costs, and the premature closure of sites due to coronavirus. This underspend will be retained by MHCLG.



East Essex Hackspace at the opening of Open Doors Rochford, 2019
Meanwhile Space/Caitlin Mogridge Photography

OPEN DOORS TIMELINE

2018

November

- MHCLG issue Open Doors Prospectus in call for landlords. Landlord applications open.

December

- 30 landlords - from **Cornwall to Hull** - apply. Landlord applications close.

2019

January

- Landlord applications reduced to a shortlist of 12.

February

- Site visits arranged to shortlisted sites.
- Application for design studios opened.

March

- Final site selection. Lease and licence drafting process agreed.
- Design studio 'Studio ND' commissioned to **design the visual identity** of the project.

April

- Successful sites announced.
- **Open call for user groups** to apply for the pilot programme.

May

- Sign 1-year head leases at Stoke-on-Trent, Bradford and Kettering, start remedial works and fit-out.
- Recruit for freelance project assistants.
- Begin user interviews.

June

- First three sites **ready for occupation**.
- User groups sign licences and **start using sites** in Stoke-on-Trent, Bradford and Kettering.
- IFF Research contracted by MHCLG to conduct independent evaluation of pilot.
- MHCLG press day at Stoke-on-Trent.

July

- Sign head lease at Slough. Meanwhile Space talk at **Slough Town Centre Partnership** event.

August

- Stoke-on-Trent open day – **community groups, landlord, press and MP Jack Brereton** meet to discuss Open Doors and their ambitions for the local area.

September

- Sign head lease at Rochford after extended delay, due to the pub first needing to be renovated to include emergency housing and developer's programme slipping.
- First grant audit.

October

- Discuss research evaluation templates with MHCLG and IFF research.
- Pre-opening event in Rochford for local council and other stakeholders to see the space and discuss potential users.
- Meanwhile Space talk on Open Doors and meanwhile use at the **Artcity Conference** in Stoke-on-

Trent, followed by a site visit for delegates.

- **'Something for the Weekend'** pop-up art social at Stoke-on-Trent site.
- Team meet-up in Kettering of user groups to discuss collaborations and improvements to space.
- First user groups start at Rochford.

November

- Community open day in Stoke-on-Trent, organised by local project assistants and user groups – tea & chat, clay workshop, interactive sound and light installation.
- Team meet-up in Slough of users to discuss new ways of working together and improving the space.
- Opening event in Rochford, attended by **user groups, MP James Duddridge, Rochford Council, MHCLG and Meanwhile Foundation**.
- **IFF Research kick-off fieldwork** and send first online surveys to user groups.

December

- **Table tennis table donated** to Kettering.
- Open Day in Slough, with meditation and reflexology sessions, blood pressure clinic, drama improvisation workshops, parent and children's craft corner, and 'Stay and Play' drop in session.
- **Christmas** meet-up in Bradford for community groups.
- Meeting of IFF Research, MHCLG and Meanwhile Foundation to discuss interim evaluation report.

2020

January

- With all sites open, it becomes apparent that running costs are lower than forecast. MHCLG and Meanwhile Foundation discuss options for underspend.

February

- A decision is taken to use underspend to **extend the project**. Initially, a pilot end date of 31 March had been planned across all sites, but delays completing initial legals and remedials led to staggered openings. It was agreed that all sites should remain open until the end of their respective one-year leases.
- Meanwhile Space speak at **Kettering Town Centre Conference** on meanwhile and business rates.
- Open day in Bradford, with music, dancing, domestic abuse quiz and homemade arcade games.

March

- Conversations with Slough landlord and users about extending the project beyond lease term.
- National lockdown announced to avoid the spread of **Covid-19**. All sites closed temporarily.

May

- Kettering landlord expresses an interest in extending the project beyond lease term, leading to a discussion between MHCLG and Meanwhile Foundation about using underspend to extend lease and reopen after lockdown – MHCLG unable to fund due to impact of Covid-19 on departmental budget.
- Decision taken to close down sites at Bradford, Kettering, Stoke-on-Trent. Services cancelled, furniture distributed among user groups. Sites returned to landlord.
- Final wave of online surveys sent by IFF Research to user groups.

June

- Decision taken to close down Slough site. Services cancelled, furniture given to nearby community centre.

July

- Meanwhile Space send **impact assessments** to landlords, partners and community groups.

August

- IFF Research publish their Open Doors **evaluation report**.

September

- Close down of Rochford site. Services cancelled, furniture distributed to Rochford District Council.
- Final grant audit.

IMPACT

How far Open Doors was able to meet its objectives was measured using data collected through Meanwhile Space impact assessments sent out as online surveys to users and partners at the end of the project, and the independent evaluation of IFF Research. Of the Meanwhile Space impact assessments, 20 user and 3 partner surveys were completed and returned.

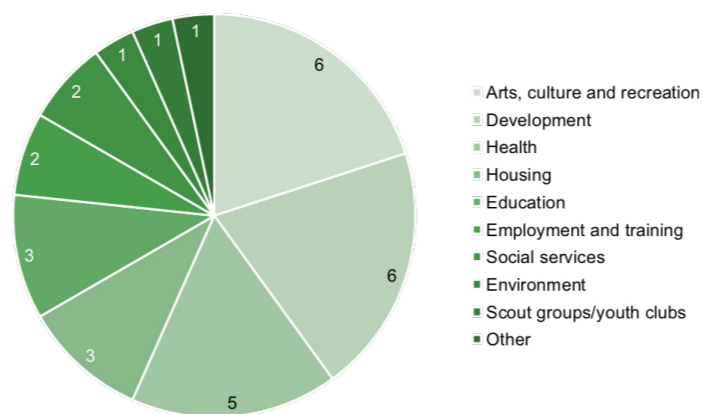
This section draws on information gathered through both evaluation processes. Data from MS impact assessments is indicated by (MS); data from IFF Research's evaluations is indicated by (IFF).

1. SUPPORT COMMUNITY GROUPS TO DELIVER MUCH-NEEDED SERVICES TO YOUNG ADULTS AND OLDER PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK OF SUFFERING FROM LONELINESS

183 applications were received from individuals and user groups interested in using Open Doors spaces. Some of these applicants withdrew before signing because of other commitments, because after discussion they felt that the programme was not what they were looking for, or because they wanted to be able to charge. Several applications were in process when the country went into lockdown. Some were rejected on interview because they did not fit the conditions of use as outlined below. **43 applicants signed licences** and joined the programme.

“The space, experience and the opportunity given to our Association was exceptional and enabled us to embrace community participation in our activities.”

Slough Ghana Society



Base: All respondents who submitted a Wave 1 MI form (n=29).

Figure 2

All groups had a **community focus**. While not all were explicitly about combatting loneliness, opportunities for interaction with others were generally an integral part of the activities provided (see figure 2).

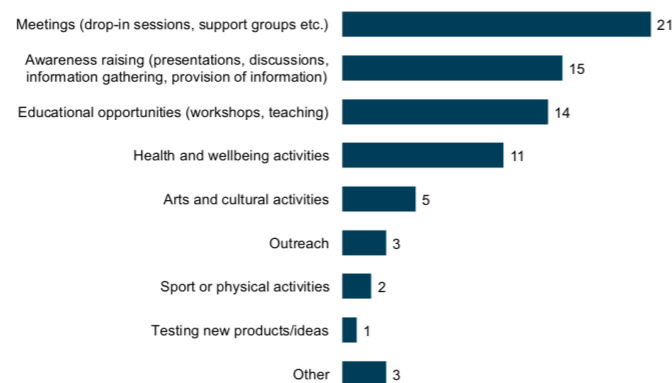
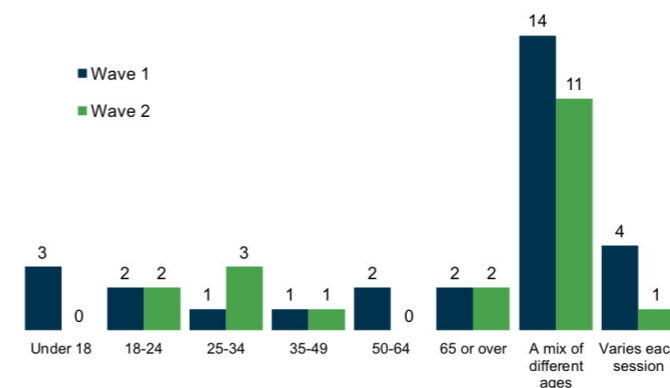


Figure 3

When surveyed on the types of activities provided, the majority said that **they held meetings, drop-in sessions, support groups and awareness-raising activities**. Many of the groups' sessions involved more than one type of activity, with just under half of respondents providing educational opportunities (such as workshops or teaching) and/or health and wellbeing activities (IFF; see figure 3).

The age demographic of users varied, and groups generally **welcomed a mix of ages** - including young adults and older people - rather than being targeted at a specific group. Over half of those surveyed said that their attendees were a mix of ages, and a further 11% said that it varied with each session (IFF; see figure 4).



Base: All respondents who submitted a Wave 1 or Wave 2 MI form - Wave 1 (n=29), Wave 2 (n=20).

Figure 4

The amount of time needed per session varied between groups. 38% booked the space for a 3-4 hour timeslot, with 28% needing it for 2 hours or less and 34% needing it for more than 4 hours. The majority (59%) of users surveyed used their space once a week, with a further 17% using it twice per week. (IFF; see figure 5)

Of those who completed the MS impact assessment, **40% had never rented a space prior to Open Doors**. The chief opportunities arising out of Open Doors, according to MS respondents, were:

- Greater visibility allowing reach out to the community and/or a new audience
- Expansion of professional networks and partnerships
- Improved accessibility from central location
- Creation of welcoming atmosphere
- Expansion of activities/services

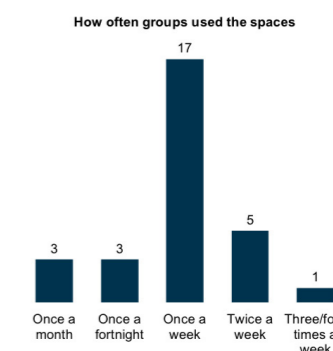
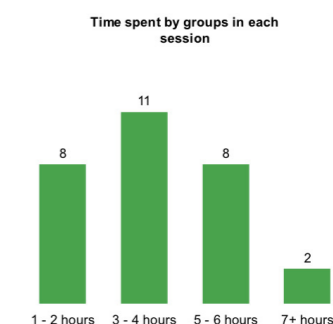
55% of respondents reported that they were **able to reach more people** as a result of being

part of Open Doors, and 30% received some form of recognition for their activities, such as awards or new funding (MS).

Several users withdrew from the programme midway through the year. Reasons included:

- Growing into their own permanent spaces
- Other commitments, or not enough staff to keep running regular activities
- Not getting the desired outcomes from participating
- Space constraints, no suitable timeslots (MS)

The early closure of sites due to Covid-19 before work to secure the legacy of the Open Doors spaces could be completed meant that at the time of the impact assessments, users were still **struggling to find alternative premises** and many were worried about sustaining momentum. They are additionally impacted by the difficulties of staging community activities safely when Covid-19 remains a risk and many community venues remain closed.



Base: All respondents who submitted a Wave 1 MI form (n=29).

Figure 5

2. INCREASE FOOTFALL IN HIGH STREETS AND TOWN CENTRES

In total, approximately **1,800 people** accessed the sites over the course of the programme.¹

90% of user groups reported that they made **more visits to the town centre** during Open Doors, with 85% of groups taking the opportunity to also visit shops, cafés, bars and restaurants while in town (MS).

IFF Research concluded that Open Doors brought more people into the area, but that as the scale of the intervention was small it was difficult to gauge the impact of any increased footfall on the local economy.

3. HELP TO BUILD SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Through facilitating the activities of community groups, who all worked in different ways to promote social good, the programme helped build socially stronger communities. It also **encouraged friendships to be formed and supportive networks to be built**. Through activating sites and increasing footfall it may have helped mitigate some of the anti-social behaviours associated with high vacancy.

As part of their fieldwork, IFF Research asked local businesses if takings had increased due to Open Doors. Some had noted an increase in custom as a result of being close to the Open Doors site - however, again due to the small scale of the intervention, IFF concluded that the boost to the local economy had been slight. There are also difficulties with measuring impact in this way as at some sites with many neighbouring businesses, staff would have had little indication of whether customers had also been to the Open Doors site or have been able

¹ Estimated figure, as few groups kept attendance records. Calculated from average total number of attendees per group, IFF p41

to single out the impact of Open Doors against other variables. When MS asked groups to estimate how much more money they spent in local businesses between them per week while in town to visit Open Doors, 26% reported that they had spent up to £5, 21% spent £5-10, £21% spent £10-15, and **32% spent over £20**.

“Without this initial opportunity we would not be in the position we are in today securing funding for the locality and employing positions for paid work and volunteering.”
Sporting Communities

91 volunteering opportunities were generated by groups having access to Open Doors sites (MS). Through recruiting and training local project assistants, the programme also built capacity for managing further meanwhile projects in the future. Several of the groups were able to use the space to provide **training** and back-to-work support for individuals experiencing barriers to employment. Other benefits to user groups included opportunities to **test new ideas, develop their projects and improve skills, confidence and ambition** (see figure 6).

IFF Research recommend that there should be a **greater concentration of similar sites in any particular town centre to achieve greater economic uplift**.

4. RAISE THE PROFILE OF COMMUNITY USES ON THE HIGH STREET

IFF’s qualitative research makes clear that groups found that having access to high street premises helped them reach more people, as the sites were **accessible and visible**.

Open Doors branding, with information about

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

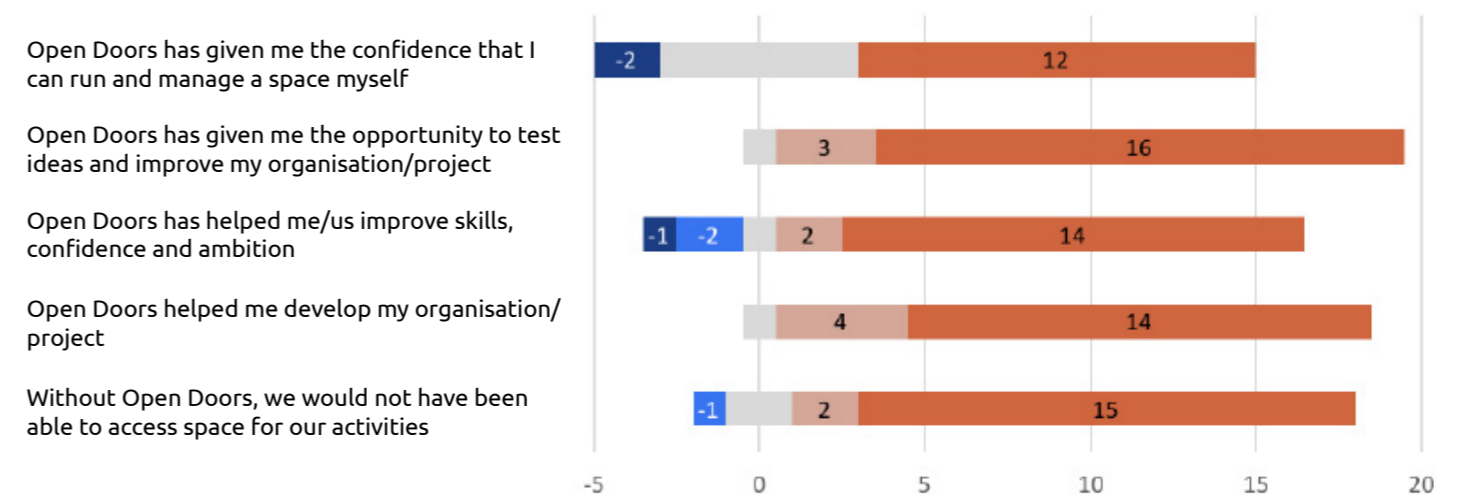


Figure 6

the programme set out in shop window vinyls, raised awareness of the spaces and their community purpose.

Facebook pages for the sites had a total of 1,076 likes and 1,124 follows between them, and actively engaged with local organisations to build networks. **Open days** raised awareness of the programme among passers-by and local communities.

“I had a lovely time working on the project and meeting all the community groups, there could be a chance that I end up working for one doing ceramics in the community”

Project Assistant, Stoke-on-Trent

The project generated **local press** about the programme and the new activities on the high streets. Interviews or reports ran in: *The Guardian, New Start Magazine, Herbert Smith Freehills, Placemaking Resource, Stoke Sentinel, BBC Radio Stoke, Signal Radio, BBC Radio Leeds, ITV, BBC Radio Northampton, BCB Radio, Sunrise*

Radio, Southend Echo News, Yellow Advertiser, BBC Essex.

Meanwhile Foundation received 22 enquiries from local authorities and other parties who had heard about Open Doors and were interested in discussing the possibilities of launching similar schemes in their own areas.

5. ENCOURAGE MEANWHILE USE TO HELP SUPPORT LANDLORDS STRUGGLING TO COVER BUSINESS RATES, UTILITY BILLS AND OTHER COSTS

In their interviews with IFF Research, most landlords reported that their main motivation to become involved in the programme was **social benefit to communities**. They were also looking for relief from business rates, and could see the value of putting their properties back into use to create a more active high street and to improve the future desirability of their properties.

Previous to Open Doors, and as in all cases the 3-month period of empty rates relief had been

exceeded, the landowners were liable for full **business rates** on their properties. During the programme this cost to them was removed, as business rates were covered by the Open Doors grant funding (with 80% statutory charity relief applied, as the leases were held by Meanwhile Foundation), as were any applicable BID levies. Without Open Doors each landlord would have been liable for the business rates bills, which varied between £600 and £2,000 per month for the Open Doors sites.

Landlords also saved money on utilities costs, although these were minimal while the property was empty. Open Doors took over responsibility for non-structural maintenance and fire safety equipment service contracts. At one site, part of a shopping centre, there was a service charge of £578.00pm which was covered by the programme.

Landlords also benefitted from the **refurbishments** paid for through the Open Doors £25,000 per site set-up budget, although much of this budget went on fixtures and fittings which the landlord did not retain. In some cases, the landlord may have accepted costs to renovate a property to the minimum standard necessary to be accepted onto the programme. These are costs that would likely have been incurred should the landlord have been able to let the property commercially.

Through improving the presentation and usability of the premises and bringing more vibrancy to the local high street, it was anticipated that the Open Doors programme could help landlords bring these properties **back into commercial use.**

6. PROVIDE NEW USES FOR EMPTY PROPERTIES ON HIGH STREETS

Sites that were selected for the pilot had been vacant for between 18 months and four years

prior to being repurposed for use as an Open Doors venue.

The units all proved to be suited to community use, with no substantial structural alterations required. User groups were positive about the location, fit-out and design of the spaces.

The use and location of the units included some constraints. Some spaces were too small for the most popular groups and were incompatible with some suggested sporting activities. Limited storage and lack of parking at some sites posed challenges. Due to budget restraints not all bathrooms could be made fully accessible.

“The space legitimised us as a group, as younger creatives people were more likely to take us seriously as a formalised community group”

Movie Mavericks

It is not possible to measure the success of Open Doors in assisting the landlords to find new tenants for their properties, as Covid-19 restrictions have made it difficult to operate community venues, and securing commercial tenancies in the current climate is even more challenging than previously.

Prior to lockdown, four of the five landlords were **interested in extending** the Open Doors programme into a new lease term if further funding could be secured.

Figures 2 - 5 from 'Open Doors Pilot Programme - Evaluation report', MHCLG, June 2020. Licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. Figure 6 Meanwhile Space. Data taken from Impact Assessments, July 2020.

OPEN DOORS VOICES: THE LANDLORD Rochford District Council

“The market town of Rochford has suffered in recent years from the closure of two banks and a supermarket, in addition to the former King’s Head public house, leaving a number of empty properties. The scheme came along at just the right time and seemed a good opportunity to help use the town’s strong community spirit to help attract footfall back into town.



Open Doors Rochford, in the old Kings Head Inn, facing the market square
Meanwhile Space/Caitlin Mogridge Photography

The revitalisation of part of a historic building, and the creation of a community hub, would give various groups and projects a place to meet in the heart of the town. In providing a free space for groups to potentially try out new ideas, there was potential that this could lead to the establishment of groups and projects which would further benefit the community in the long run. It was also hoped that by providing an additional reason for people to come into Rochford, it would boost footfall and spending at neighbouring shops and cafes. Finally, it would demonstrate the potential of the units for future occupiers after the end of the project.

In providing a space for various users, the scheme has had a wider impact upon the District’s community. It served as a base for East Essex Hackspace, who were subsequently able to take on a redundant council sports pavilion, and are currently busy transforming it into a facility for the whole community. It has also served as a valuable hub for organisations such as Anxiety Society and Eco Essex

It has helped us to realise the strength of the local community spirit in quickly supporting opportunities such as this, and in our opinion has vindicated our initial stance to oppose the entire building being converted into residential accommodation - as the developer initially wanted.

I do believe that had it not been for Covid19, the potential of the centre would have continued to grow, and we would be in a position to look far more seriously at a succession plan. Spaces such as this have a key role to play in the future of high streets and town centres, and in supporting wider regeneration - ideally in future a model that provides some form of space for both community/voluntary groups and fledgling businesses.”



FENTON, STOKE-ON-TRENT

283 City Road, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 2QA

The town: Stoke is made up of six towns, including Fenton. Residents are loyal to their town, but most large retail and services are located outside Fenton. Stoke is famous for its potteries, but was hit hard by the decline in the British manufacturing sector in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to a sharp rise in unemployment.

The site: A single-storey retail unit with two

rooms and a separate kitchenette, leading onto a courtyard. Situated in a row of shops on a busy A-road. 540sq ft.

The landlord: Private landlord with strong family connection to the area. Committed to working in the community on social projects.

The project assistant: A ceramics curator and designer, studying for an MA and working part-time at a pottery factory. Occasional support from a second project assistant, a freelance graphic designer.

The users: 19 received applications, 6 active user groups. Filmmakers and enthusiasts; campaign group for local park; sports for communities; life skills workshops; network and development for local third sector; support to get unemployed people into volunteering, training or employment; ceramics workshops for children.



'Something for the Weekend' pop-up art social. *Leone Davis*.
Top: Open Doors was able to transform a standard retail unit in Fenton. *Studio ND*

BRADFORD

29 John Street, Bradford, BD1 3JS



Some of the users of Open Doors Bradford at their community open day. *Meanwhile Space / Jake Walker*

The town: Bradford grew rapidly during the Industrial Revolution, becoming the 'wool capital of the world'. This history is still visible in the old mills and grand Victorian architecture, but in recent years the city has faced economic and social challenges in common with much of post-industrial Northern England. Retail vacancy was at nearly 20% in 2018.

The site: A two-storey unit with a kitchenette on both floors and a large, street-facing window. Located within the Oastler Centre market, with good visibility from a high footfall street and within easy walking distance of train stations and bus stops. The Oastler Centre is to be demolished and redeveloped in 2022 as part of a wider masterplan, and the shifting city centre and opening of a new shopping centre 'downhill' is compounding vacancy issues in this part of the city. 930 sq ft.

The landlord: Bradford Council. The council has an active interest in meanwhile and is looking for ways to bring vacant property in the area into use.

The project assistant: A freelancer specialising in copywriting, digital advertising and social media management.

The users: 24 received applications, 6 active user groups. Game-making workshops for children; social and support group for refugees; club to discuss local culture and news; support group for domestic abuse survivors; social and support group for Swahili-speaking communities.



KETTERING

48 High Street, Kettering, NN16 8SX

The town: Market town 15 miles northeast of Northampton. Above-average vacancy following the departure of some big-name retail brands. Large and growing commuter population.

The site: A retail unit in Kettering town centre with a room on the ground floor and a storage space in the basement. The unit is located on the high street of Kettering, with good visibility, footfall and transport links. 771 sq ft.

The landlord: Nationwide. Own several similar empty properties in the area, and are keen to support social impact projects.

The project assistant: Freelancer returning to work after a career break with experience of delivering community training programmes and

volunteering in charitable sector. Meanwhile Space core staff assumed direct management from October 2019.

The users: 19 received applications, 8 active user groups. Chronic pain support group; zero-waste food service; drop-in centre for young adults with mild learning disabilities; local voluntary network; addiction support group; drop-in centre for homeless people.

ROCHFORD

King's Head Pub, 11 West Street, SS4 1BE, Rochford

The town: Rochford is a small market town in Essex with a strong sense of history and a direct railway line to London. Despite a popular weekly market and a range of small independent retail and service businesses, the town is suffering from the changes in the retail environment, and from the closure of two high street banks. The district has a higher than average proportion of over-65s.

The site: A historic former public house and grade-II listed building facing onto the market square, next to a bus stop. Open Doors occupies three rooms; the rest of the building has been converted into affordable housing. The pub was last occupied in 2016, and suffered significant damage in an arson attempt in 2018. 367 sq ft.

The landlord: Leased by Rochford Council from a private developer. The council wish to bring the three potential small units to the market to address a range of socio-economic issues.

The project assistant: A project manager with a background in business and engineering, and an interior design qualification. Very engaged with the local community.

The users: 54 received applications, 13 active user groups. Mortgage advice; hspace; dementia and wellbeing support; anxiety society; laughing yoga; story, rhyme and activity sessions; outreach support for people with problems impacting their health, financial and housing wellbeing; SEN parent-to-parent support; mental health support group; association to promote and support local voluntary and community groups; local community group supporting and inspiring residents with their eco journey.

SLOUGH

Unit 2, Queensmere Shopping Centre, Slough, SL1 1LN

The town: Large town in Berkshire with one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the UK. An extensive regeneration project is redeveloping the town centre as a 'cultural quarter' for the creative media, information and communications industries. Has a meanwhile vision in place, managed by a town centre partnership.

The site: Large retail space on the high street. Part of the Queensmere Shopping Centre. High street frontage and amenities shared with shopping centre on Slough High Street. 1,164sq ft.

The landlord: Green Monarch

The project assistant: Individual working as a motivational coach for children and adults, and as a freelance sales consultant. Involved in various local projects in Slough.

The users: 47 received applications, 10 active user groups. Improvisation group; Ghana society; wellness group for people with long-term medical conditions; entrepreneurship and wellness workshops to bring together young people and seniors; Caribbean forum; support group for vulnerable families; Bengali community organisation; community group for local women and their families; yoga and meditation group; council-organised health and wellbeing drop-in.



Above: Blood pressure testing at Slough open day.
Opposite: Open Doors Kettering. Meanwhile Space/Mike Massaro

WHAT WE LEARNED

The Open Doors pilot was designed to **trial** a model of high street meanwhile use. The obstacles and opportunities encountered in the course of delivery, and the data collected by impact assessments and the IFF Research evaluation, allow **key lessons** to be drawn to inform any **future evolution** of the model.

Chief among these is that the modest scale of the Open Doors intervention necessarily limited the potential social and economic impact. Repeating the programme at a **larger scale** could allow the realisation of its full range of potential benefits.

SITES

In general, the **properties were well-suited** to being repurposed for community use. They were of an appropriate size and fit-out for most users' activities. The design was felt to be welcoming and the general quality of space high.

Sites were selected that did not require major renovations, and fitting them out to an acceptable level of finish could be comfortably achieved within the £25,000 budget. Not all bathrooms could be made fully accessible – future iterations of the project should address this in the site selection criteria.

Site selection criteria could also place more emphasis on parking and storage space, as users found limited provision at some sites challenging.

The properties' large, street-facing windows increased a feeling of openness on to the high streets. However, they also meant that groups requiring privacy, or who felt threatened by unwanted attention, preferred to use back rooms or upstairs rooms where available. This

should also be considered at site selection stage – alternatively, blinds could be installed.

Many groups found the **central location** of the sites to be invaluable, improving their visibility and accessibility to the community. The site that attracted the lowest number of active user groups - despite having an engaged landlord and user community, the most active Facebook page, supportive local stakeholders and wide press coverage - was also the site situated on the street with the lowest footfall.

Adding a **publicly-accessible social space** inside or in front of the premises - for example, seating areas - could be considered as a way to encourage community interaction and street activation. However this would make the management model more complicated, and costs and risks would need to be balanced against any potential benefits.

The **visual identity** designed for Open Doors was bright and energetic, and effective in its messaging. Incorporating greater adaptability into future branding would allow the expression of the sites' unique characters and user mix. More prominence could be given in designs for street-facing windows to the promotion of space users and their programme of activities. Some users felt a more informal window design would be more inviting.

The most active site in the Open Doors pilot was situated in the smallest town. Other factors such as a well-connected local project assistant and a supportive local authority make it impossible to draw any firm conclusions from this correspondence. However, if the Open Doors programme were to be repeated across a greater number of sites, it would be feasible to investigate what if any impact the **size or geographic location of the urban area** in which it is situated has on a meanwhile space.

LANDLORDS

Landlords (or their agents) of all five sites were **supportive** of the scheme. They were engaged and open to communications, assisted with the evaluation process, and in many cases actively helped promote the project.

Four of the five participating landlords were interested in an extension of the scheme beyond its end date, while one landlord wished to return to seeking a commercial rental income from his property. Covid-19 cut short discussions around the possibilities of **moving to a longer-term proposal**. While this was an unforeseeable event, it does highlight the importance of starting conversations early in a project lifecycle - ideally at around the halfway point - to allow time to explore management and funding options with all parties.

LEGALS

Delays in agreeing terms of head leases caused some sites to open later than planned. Where Meanwhile Foundation was able to **communicate directly** with a landlord, and the scheme was a priority for that landlord, leases could be arranged quickly. Where multiple layers of decision-making process within a landlord organisation had to be navigated, lease agreements were often delayed. Reliance on a developer completing works at one site before the head lease could be signed also introduced significant risk.

Community groups were comfortable with signing the licences to occupy. However, being reliant on a physical signing and mailing process caused delays and confusions. A system that permits licences to be **signed digitally** should be implemented if possible.

The requirement that all user groups hold their own **public liability insurance** caused confusion for some groups. For community groups with no or low income, PLI represents a significant expense. Meanwhile Foundation held an umbrella policy covering the activities of some groups; if also offers PLI at low cost through its membership programme. Care should be taken when delivering community-focussed meanwhile projects to set out insurance requirements and options for all groups in a clear and accessible format.

MANAGEMENT

Meanwhile Space operational experience, management tools and health and safety procedures ensured the smooth running of all sites.

User groups **shared responsibility** for the spaces and ensured that they were left clean and secured. They reported any maintenance issues to the Meanwhile Space project team.

Local project assistants played an important role in managing upkeep and services, engaging with the user groups, and promoting the scheme locally. This was a freelance role, with allocation for one day a week from the site running costs budget. Being reliant on



Meanwhile Space / Jake Walker



Meanwhile Space / Jake Walker

spaces that are more tailored to their local context, and lead to greater awareness of, and pride in, the project locally.

Communication between Meanwhile Space and MHCLG was good, and reporting structures worked well. Decision-making pre-Covid-19 was in general quick and effective, unless ministerial input was required at a time of multiple competing priorities.

The day-to-day management and promotion of five Open Doors sites put high demands on staff time. **Adequate staff resourcing** must be factored in to future models.

EVALUATION

There was a good level of engagement with IFF Research from those involved in the programme. A range of information about the pilot programme was gathered, allowing recommendations to be made about feasibility for scaling.

Early closure of the sites impacted Meanwhile Space's reporting and evaluating processes, and prevented the capture of the stories of those involved. A system of **ongoing data gathering** throughout a project's lifecycle by the operator would help minimise this risk. Collecting additional data from community groups at the application stage would allow progress against baselines to be measured more effectively.

While the evaluation processes measured impact on community groups and landlords, there was no mechanism to assess the experience of **end users**, the participants who joined activities at Open Doors sites. An impact reporting tool shared with all user groups would allow them to measure their own impact, and allow the wider programme to gather a more comprehensive set of data. More emphasis could also be placed on measuring

individual freelancers presented some risk. At sites where they were enthusiastic and well-suited to the job, they helped the spaces run smoothly and were key to the success of the projects locally. Where they were not so well suited to the role, or not able to work for a period of time, there was an additional burden on the core project team and less effective engagement with the community.

A stronger element of community co-creation could be trialled in future, with local authorities, project assistants, users groups, civic organisations and residents working together to make decisions, and to design and manage the projects. Local steering groups could help ensure that a range of interests input into projects throughout their lifecycle. While less feasible in very time-limited meanwhile interventions, any longer projects could explore whether such **collaborative** processes create

OPEN DOORS VOICES: THE USER Impact Gamers

"We had a space in the basement of a church, off the beaten track a bit. Our aim is to work with kids from deprived backgrounds and the church is in an area that has really cheap housing, bad landlords, a lot of families who don't have much. We want all of the people in that area to become friends with kids who aren't in the same situation, and Open Doors in the town centre offered us that. They were able to mix with different ethnicities and cultures outside their own. The city centre venue created a level playing field, and it also made us more accessible because it looked nice. The church basement has peeling paintwork and a carpet that hasn't been replaced in I don't know how long and it's a very youth ragtag environment but with Open Doors the parents would stay and drink tea and coffee and chat. And it was nice and it was warm and it was so central.

Kids come along to our groups and learn to make games and we interact with them and we try to be a positive influence on their lives and games making is the vehicle that we use to try and invest in young people. If they end up making rubbish games but they're happier and more confident then we've succeeded.

During our time at Open Doors we ran two different kinds of sessions. A session that was group coding to get young people who had a common interest but didn't know each other to form friendships. And the second one was social gaming, where we were trying out getting up to 8 young people to work together as a team to make a computer game together.

They opened a board games cafe the week after we started going to Open Doors, and I was telling the kids about it so some of them started going to the board games cafe and getting milkshakes and playing some board games. We'd buy fruit and veg for our family from the market that was behind Open Doors, other people would as well. Pretty much every parent would access the town centre for something else while the session was happening. Before or after, or even some would drop their kids off and go shopping and come back.

The fact that we were city central was brilliant because our groups overlapped the Yorkshire Games Festival at the museum, and none of these kids who want to be video games makers had been to this free event that happens in Bradford city centre every year. There is this aspect that - the museum's the museum. But because we were there, we said to the kids at our Saturday event, right we're heading down straight after, and we could talk to the parents and say this would be really great for your kids.

I just think it was great. There's so many closed shops in Bradford that it was like a little ray of hope. It would be so nice to have like 10 across a street because every other shop in Bradford town centre is closed. If there's more than one shop you'd end up knowing other people, and if you could categorise groups you might want to stay around after. I think Open Doors Youth, Open Doors Hobby & Crafts, Open Doors Music and Arts, Open Doors Social Justice or whatever, and then you've got that kind of flow and volunteers and it's the stronger together thing isn't it."

Shelley Taylor at Open Doors Rochford
Meanwhile Space/Caitlin Mogridge Photography



OPEN DOORS VOICES:
THE PROJECT ASSISTANT
Shelley Taylor

"I thought Open Doors was a very worthwhile project that would help the local community.

The impact had to be positive. Simply from the amount of people that actually took part and benefited from or enjoyed the activities. When you also consider the secondary effect on their family and friends because the original person has a good experience - the impact is far greater. Most people at the bus stop, right outside of Open Doors, would make positive comments, and comments on Facebook were pretty good (apart from a few who wanted their pub back!)

I met lots of new and interesting people with a diverse set of goals and perspectives, but all with one common aim - wanting to do something good for the community!

The experience captured my interest in place management and how this can have an effect on the vibrancy and vitality of town centres and hence on the community in general. This is something I am now looking into further."

wider community impact through street intercepts.

FINANCE

Careful cost management meant that the programme was brought in under budget. Due to the nature of grant funding, the process of reallocating any underspend to project extension or improvement is not straightforward.

Meanwhile Foundation's charitable status meant that 80% statutory relief was applied to **business rates**. In conversations with community groups around taking over responsibility for the lease, it became clear that business rates would be a major stumbling block. The business rates system as it currently stands is likely to severely restrict the types of organisations able to apply for meanwhile leases on high street units. In some instances, it may be possible to explore opportunities with the local council for the granting of discretionary relief. Alternatively, a charitable organisation could take on the lease on behalf of users.

There are modifications to the model that could be considered that may make it less dependent on central government grant funding, for example: asking users to contribute to running costs but allowing them to charge for their services or activities; laddering contributions as groups trial ideas and then grow; using the space for start-up business incubation or rented workspace, as well as - or instead of - for community groups; partnering with local organisations with access to funding; seeking more investment in the programme from landlords or local authorities. Allowing income-generating businesses would also provide more of a boost to the local economy.

55% of the Open Doors users who responded

to the MS impact assessments said they could **contribute** to the costs of a similar shared space in the future. Of these users, the average maximum amount that they felt they would be in a position to contribute per month was £80.

COMMUNITY

In general, users co-habited the space well. In some sites, there was little interaction between the groups as they used the space at different times. At others, whatsapp groups, meet-ups and open days allowed a sense of community to develop.

Despite local press coverage and promotion through social media, many local businesses and residents remained unaware of the project (IFF, p11). In the experience of Meanwhile Space, projects with small footprints and short timeframes can struggle to make themselves heard. Public events and community engagement can help raise a project's profile and boost participation, but they have a cost in staff time.

One option to increase impact and local awareness would be to **cluster sites** on a high street or in a town centre. This would help the project build a recognised identity, and would encourage a community to develop, sharing skills and resources between sites. As leases end and others begin, users could move between an ecosystem of spaces, locking in the benefits of the programme long-term. A range of permitted uses - community, business, cultural - would expand the benefits of the programme to a wider segment of the local population.

Local meanwhile hotspots could then be linked to others around the country through a national open access **network**, allowing everyone involved in meanwhile projects to share skills, experiences and new ideas.

NEXT STEPS

Open Doors was a prototype. It was the first step in a project commissioned by MHCLG, who saw the need for innovation as town centres struggle towards a new sense of identity and purpose.

As the Open Doors pilot has drawn to a close and data from its evaluation has become available, the indication is that meanwhile use plays a beneficial part for communities in town centres to access space, develop partnerships and reach out to their end-users more efficiently. Most of the spaces weren't able to be self-sufficient beyond this pilot period however and we would like to explore this potential as part of a future phase. We are also keen to test the ability to scale meanwhile use as part of a nationwide strategy.

In May 2020, Meanwhile Foundation commissioned its own research and development project to consider what can be learned from Open Doors, and from other meanwhile projects that have tried to expand.

The Foundation also wanted to understand the impact of Covid-19 on town centres, and the role that meanwhile use could and should play in recoveries. An overview of pertinent policy elements allowed the identification of some key obstacles which, if addressed, could materially improve the delivery of future meanwhile projects.

Based on this research, we are proposing an evolution of the Meanwhile Foundation membership model that will support and enable meanwhile projects across the country, with a focus on partnerships with local authorities, BIDs and other civic organisations to build capacity for the further development of effective meanwhile initiatives across the UK. We are further seeking funding to support a trial of a variety of meanwhile models in up to 20 locations across the country. Developing this model is the crucial next step towards reactivating high streets and putting them back to use for their communities.

CONCLUSION

The need for effective meanwhile use is now more urgent than it was at Open Door's inception. The pandemic has accelerated the collapse of high street retailing, and vacancy rates are rising. City centres are hollowing out as office workers stay at home. Commercial landlords are struggling to collect rents. Jobs - particularly among the young, particularly outside London and the South East - are already being lost and inequality is on the rise.

At the same time, there has been a surge in localism and community initiatives, an appreciation of the importance of neighbourhood shops and services. There is an opportunity now to create town centres that exist not simply to turn a profit, but to help their inhabitants thrive.

In the short term, meanwhile use can help revitalise empty high streets. It can also provide access to space with low financial risk, at a

time of stark economic uncertainty. And it can provide space for community, cultural and entrepreneurial ideas to flourish in areas that have been hit hard by the pandemic.

In the medium to long term, meanwhile use could be part of a transformation of town centres from retail clones to multifunctional hubs, enabling communities to reshape their own urban environments to adapt to the new realities.

The Open Doors pilot has been illuminating and inspiring, and Meanwhile Foundation would like to thank all the partners, landlords and community groups whose energy and enthusiasm have made it such a success.

If you have any questions about Open Doors, or would like to be part of the future of the project, please contact info@meanwhile.org.uk.



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