

# **Managing public sector property assets to reduce inequity and enable small organisations to deliver their local services or cultural offer**

**A policy brief for public sector property owners**

## **Key information**

Publication type: General

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## **1. London's cultural and community spaces are at risk??**

The people and organisations that run community-led and cultural spaces play a fundamental role in creating cultural, social and economic value for Londoners and serve London's diverse communities.

Community-led and cultural spaces are often described as 'cultural infrastructure' or 'social infrastructure'. These categories exist to help policymakers understand the role that specific spaces play for different communities. In daily life spaces may blur the boundaries between these definitions and are hard to categorise in this way.

These spaces could be:

- a music venue, theatre, or artists' studio offering training and skills-development opportunities, as well as opportunities to meet, create, and socialise
- a local restaurant as a place where people go to find out about support services available in their native language
- in some neighbourhoods, a café, a barber, or a tailor's shop that might hold significant cultural heritage value.

These spaces contribute positively to community cohesion and wellbeing; and provide opportunities for Londoners to represent their unique identities, and celebrate shared experiences. The ability of all Londoners to access spaces representing their communities is key to their agency in telling London's history, and shaping its

future.

Worryingly, over the past decade and a half, London's community-led and cultural spaces have faced increasing risks. High land values, business rates, redevelopment pressures, funding reductions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently, the cost-of-living crisis have challenged even the best-established spaces.??

## 2. Taking action to stop the loss of spaces Londoners love and value

Since 2016, the Mayor's Culture and Community Spaces at Risk programme has been providing information, advice, guidance, advocacy and policy work to help protect against threats to London's community-led and cultural spaces. Evidence from direct engagement with organisations operating spaces indicates that spaces run by and serving Londoners who are more likely to face inequalities are at particular risk. This is because these spaces face additional challenges when interacting with the property system. While the Mayor's Culture and Community Spaces at Risk programme can support spaces at immediate risk, system change is needed to address the root causes.

We commissioned research to understand the disparities that organisations led by underrepresented groups face in their ability to secure and sustain spaces for cultural and community uses. The research process combined desk research with the lived experience and expertise of community-led and cultural organisations as active research participants. The full research report is available on our website.

## 3. Our research findings

### Five key conditions putting spaces at risk

The research identified five key conditions impacting the level of risk that community-led and cultural organisations face. This brief focuses on the two factors most relevant to public sector property owners: land value and increase in business rates, and networks and relationships.

The five key conditions are:

- **Land value and increases in business rates** pose one of the biggest challenges facing all community-led and cultural spaces in London. They create a property market with high barriers to entry for renting and owning property and put existing spaces at risk due to unsustainable rents.
- **The national planning system** shapes planning and development conditions for community-led and cultural spaces. Permitted development rights within the National Planning Policy Framework put their assets at risk and the framework lacks specific protections for cultural and social infrastructure.
- **Licensing restrictions** threaten the sustainability of late-night venues. Development has brought more residents near licensed premises. Spaces have come under increased scrutiny for drawing late-night

crowds and generating noise in mixed-use areas of London and can face stricter licensing controls.

- **Funding reductions and funding design** threaten community-led and cultural spaces. Austerity measures have limited funding and resources available through local authorities and other public-sector organisations and increased the financial precarity of organisations who are already struggling with cost and rent increases. They now struggle to secure crucial long-term funding agreements and core funding.
- **Networks and relationships** with key stakeholders such as local authorities, property owners and funders, benefit community-led and cultural spaces by helping them gain traction in lease negotiations, secure future funding and more. Underdeveloped or tense relationships can create problems and put them at risk.

## **Spaces led by or serving underrepresented Londoners face additional challenges**

London has high levels of inequality, impacting Londoners' social and economic circumstances. Race and ethnicity, sex, income level and class, disability, religion or belief, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other identity factors, impact how Londoners experience inequality.??

London's inequalities are structural. This means they arise from historical situations and are deeply rooted in institutional systems that govern key factors in securing and sustaining cultural and community spaces – such as property ownership and finance. Historic factors increase the challenges in accessing, securing and sustaining space. Groups that, historically, have had less access to wealth creation and financial resources are less able to secure property in London, where land values are high. They are also more likely to lose access to property.??

## **Land value and increases in business rates**

High land values make it harder for community-led and cultural organisations to compete in the property market against more lucrative land uses – such as housing or commercial office space. Even when they find premises, organisations report increasing difficulty agreeing long-term secure leases. Many property owners, including local authorities, are unwilling to sign long-term leases with cultural and community organisations.??

Underrepresented groups face additional barriers and higher risks due to factors such as, for Londoners of Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, discrimination in access to credit impacting ability to secure space, and, for LGBTQ+ Londoners, a need for a central, safe and accessible space, but those spaces being the most expensive. Underrepresented groups also have limited access to professional legal and property expertise and as a result often have short-term, insecure leases, limiting their eligibility to apply for capital funding and the ability to plan.?

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## **Case study: Securing historic cultural space through a Community Asset Transfer**

198 Contemporary Arts and Learning is an exhibition space in Brixton founded in 1988, after the Brixton riots. It is in an area formerly known as the Frontline. Following the 1981 Scarman Report, funding for regeneration came into the area through Brixton City Challenge, particularly for spaces serving the Black community. 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning is especially important because it's an incubator of emerging talent from Black artists, curators and arts educators. The organisation was renting its premises from Lambeth Council for 27 years before completing an asset transfer for the freehold in 2015, under the council's Community Asset Transfer programme.

[Read case study: Securing historic cultural space through a Community Asset Transfer](#)

## **Networks and relationships**

Community-led and cultural organisations operate within a network of relationships. Typically, key stakeholders include local authorities, other public-sector bodies, sector-specific network organisations, property owners, academia and funders. Having strong existing relationships with these stakeholders is mutually beneficial. For example, local authorities could see organisations as potential delivery partners, and organisations could help local authorities connect to local community groups and disseminate vital information. Property owners could see organisations as valued tenants who they can negotiate flexible arrangements with during times of financial stress. Strong relationships with funding bodies can also help organisations gain more security over long-term funding.??

Having underdeveloped relationships with key stakeholders can create problems. Lacking relationships with local authorities can mean council officers are unaware of a community space's existence, or of the important services provided from spaces. Tense relationships with property owners can limit organisations' abilities to negotiate favourable lease terms and can put organisations at risk of eviction if property owners are unwilling to grant flexibility. Lack of relationships with funders can make it more difficult for organisations to succeed in grant application awards.??

There tend to be lower levels of trust in local authorities and other public-sector bodies across many underrepresented groups due to past decisions or previous experiences of discrimination. Organisations note a lack of continued support, investment and capacity-building from councils following on from previous engagement with communities of interest.

Capacity challenges within these organisations can lead to a lack of time and resources to build, maintain and manage relationships with key stakeholders.??If they have limited relationships with property owners, leading to a lack of visibility and influence over decision affecting their spaces.



## Case study: Co-produced community facilities redevelopment

[The Selby Trust](#) manages the Selby Centre, a major multi-purpose community centre at the heart of Tottenham. The Selby Centre brings together a rich mix of individuals and organisations, primarily from racialised and other historically excluded communities in Haringey, Enfield, and beyond.

The building the centre uses is reaching the end of its useful life. At the same time, there is increasing pressure on land due to the housing shortage. Selby Trust runs the centre partnered with Haringey Council as freeholder, with investment allowing centre redevelopment.

The plans were co-produced with Selby Trust and the communities that use it. They include new housing, alongside a replacement community centre with sports hall, community hall and outdoor sporting facilities.

[Read case study: Co-produced community facilities redevelopment](#)

## 4. Recommendations

Our research has identified barriers to achieving equity in access to space. Imbalance of power is a common theme in these barriers. Overcoming the barriers requires all stakeholders to consider how they can shift power to the operators and users of space. This shift should mean involving communities as partners when shaping plans and making decisions that affect the assets they use and value.

Local authorities, the GLA group and other public sector bodies can:

- when acting as property owners, seek to offer secure, long-term leases to community-led and cultural organisations, considering social value, equity, and long-term sustainability and income-generation capacity. In doing so they can be mindful of, and address, historic inequalities in securing space faced by underrepresented groups.??
- ensure that Community Asset Transfer policies are underpinned by support and guidance for community-led and cultural organisations to successfully conduct the process.
- adopt the highest quality co-production methods in the development of asset strategies and redevelopment proposals for their own property.

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