

# Securing and protecting cultural and community spaces through relationship building

A good practice brief for cultural and community organisations

## Key information

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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. 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. Our research makes recommendations for each of these key conditions. Most of our recommendations are for public sector bodies and funders and we have published separate briefings for them. You can read these briefings on our website. There are, however, actions that cultural and community organisations can take themselves to protect the space they operate from. This brief focuses on the key condition most relevant to cultural and community organisations: 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 and 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.??

## **4. Good practice examples**

During our research, we spoke to cultural and community organisations and learned about the innovative ways they built and maintained relationships to secure and sustain space to operate from. Below are some examples which demonstrate how the organisations themselves have taken successful action to preserve their spaces. Collaborating and building partnerships are a common theme across these examples.

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## **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](#)



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

The plans were co-produced with the 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](#)



## Building alliances to secure space together?

The African Educational Cultural Health Organisation (AECHO), formed in 2003, is a charitable organisation based in Merton. It aims to assist people of African descent, and other minority ethnic communities, offering training in basic skills, citizenship, identity, diversity, enterprise, parenting and counselling. It also runs projects promoting community cohesion. AECHO wishes to manage its own space in future, with greater tenure security. Recognising significant space competition, AECHO has formed an alliance with other likeminded organisations,

advocating for space while potentially finding shared space for alliance members.

[Read case study: Building alliances to secure space together](#)





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## **Strategic relationship building to secure space in a prime location?**

?Croydon BME Forum is an umbrella organisation, supporting Black and minority ethnic voluntary sector organisations in Croydon. Established in 2003, it provides specialist infrastructure support (including community engagement and capacity building), and manages the Croydon Wellness Centre. It has a physical and digital space in the Whitgift Shopping Centre - an excellent location due to shopping footfall and good transport links. It is a one-stop shop for Black and minority ethnic community health and wellbeing services.

The organisation has developed good negotiation skills, and long-lease management expertise - using both to forge a strong working relationship with the shopping centre landlord. Alongside this are strategic local authority and NHS partnerships (both funders of the space). Croydon BME Forum now hopes to establish a second health and wellbeing hub, in another part of the borough.

[Read case study: Strategic relationship building to secure space in a prime location](#)

## **5. Recommendations**

Our research has identified some of the ways in which cultural and community organisations can be proactive and protect the spaces they operate from. Learning from other organisations facing similar challenges, cultural and community organisations may want to:

- proactively assess the risks that may arise and lead to a loss of space. By doing so, they should identify issues that may need external help.
- use existing opportunities, and develop new ones, to network with peer organisations to share best practice and local insights to secure and protect spaces.
- build strong relationships with key stakeholders, including funders, commissioners, and potential private sector partners.
- ensure that they fully understand the implications of running a space prior to entering into a lease or other rental agreement.

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