

Premises report

Premises Forum held online on 18 March 2024. Attendance: 39

VCS premises survey. Responses: 10

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Summary

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A number of pressing problems were identified at the Premises Forum. The top issues were:

- There is a real need for affordable premises with security of tenure. In an environment where voluntary and community groups are struggling financially (see our [State of the Sector report](#)), this is vitally important to enable them to continue their important work.
- Maintenance of premises is a challenge, with voluntary and community groups reporting problems with asbestos, access, rats, general maintenance and poorly heated premises.
- Funding applications for capital costs need a longer lease, and the Attlee Centre has had to turn down a capital funding offer of £160,000 because of the Council has not extended their lease to 5 years, despite the Council's own VCS Premises Policy having a provision for extending the length of a lease in these circumstances.
- Lack of transparency and communication from the Council. Voluntary and community groups did not know where to find out details of premises that they could apply to, their enquiries about this or existing leases were not answered in a timely way (in one case over a year) and information provided to a 3rd party agency was not passed on to the Council.
- Lack of consistency in applying community rent benefit and in whether those occupying community premises had a formal lease or not. There were also reports that community premises were in some cases occupied by private businesses with no public benefit rather than community organisations.
- There is a need for better value insurance
- CICs do not qualify for mandatory rate relief
- Excessive service charges on some properties.

Solutions

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- Look at empty premises across the borough to explore VCS use, particularly some of the many empty shops.
- THCVS could run a building with offices for voluntary and community groups, in an incubating model used in CVSs in other boroughs. The Professional Development Centre was potentially identified as one of these sites.
- THCVS to investigate an insurance offer for voluntary and community groups in Tower Hamlets
- Bring a discussion of social value to the next full Council meeting

Ask from the Council

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- Clarity about the future of all community premises in the current portfolio, once their current leases end.
- Provide a full list of properties in the community portfolio and their current occupants with a date when the lease expires
- Ensure formal lease documents for all community premises
- Establish a central source of information about premises – how voluntary and community organisations apply for community premises, including a list of currently empty premises across the borough
- Negotiations with developers to include community spaces in new developments

Next steps

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- The creation of a task and finish group to move forward some of the solutions and to investigate some of the empty premises in the borough. Volunteers for this group are Andy (Chisenhale), David Burbidge, Tania Shaikh (Attlee Adventure Playground), Jack Gilbert (Real).
- A further in-person solution-focused Premises Forum to better understand Council leases (with the local authority)

Appendix one

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List of issues arising from the Premises Forum

- Rising costs
- Rent discounted but service charge is now three times higher than the rent
- Always temporary premises, therefore paying more
- Unsuitability of buildings and therefore can't fulfil their mission (i.e. can't have gym)
- Being offered unsuitable buildings because the 3rd party agency that LBTH uses didn't pass the information on
- Transparency from LBTH and responding to emails
- Dangerous – asbestos on roof

- Communication with 3rd party company
- Asset management team not responding (at least 6 week delay)
- Affordable premises
- No disabled discount for service charge (3 x rent)
- Access to space being restricted by TRA
- Eviction with no notice
- Break clause makes it difficult to get funding, and lease very unreliable
- Community rent benefit inconsistency
- Lack of support from HAs or LBTH.
- On proper terms with actual leases
- No clear process
- Use restricted even though it's supposed to be for community use
- Insurance – why is insurance separate and not included in the lease
- Why is THCVS not taking a lead to get unified insurance
- Mice/rats
- Homelessness
- Cost of premises – why can't we have a peppercorn rent (we are serving the community)
- Managing agent – why did LBTH use them?
- Contract and difficulties with communications
- Relationships between organisations
- Attracting capital investment
- What happens when you have no core funding. Upkeep. Struggling. Open. Arm. In good repair
- Ambitious Academy CIC = doesn't qualify for mandatory business rate relief
- Attlee wants a longer lease. Brady Centre wants a more flexible lease – LBTH trying to tie them into a longer lease.
- Boundary Laundrette – section 25 not serviced. Almost evicted
- Osmani – forced to sign a lease in 2016. Break clause makes it very short term.
- Response times from the asset management team – 1 year without a response.
- One Consultancy Group don't have an office in the borough. Not conveying information back to the council
- Community Centres give precedence to private booking with no public benefit requirement. People can be excluded.

- Shouldn't be down to a councillor how people get spaces
- One Consulting – can't book just one hour any more.
- Chisenhale – lack of transparency/process/accountability
- Chisenhale has the choice to develop the building or shut it down (been there 44 years)

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List of possible solutions from the Premises Forum

- Connection between business and community. Raise £. Set up companies to put profits back into the community. Mutual assurance scheme. We are paying premiums
- Voluntary and community groups know how to request a council premises
- bring life back to our high streets, encourage people to go there for community activities instead of closed shops
- Formal lease documents for all community premises
- Commitment that commercial businesses paying non-market rent in a community building and VCS orgs lose out
- TH council encouraging community groups to fill vacant premises across the borough, with secure tenure
- Those who have been evicted can get their premises back
- Security of tenure
- Help with rent or free/popcorn rent
- The allocation of community premises is fair
- Rent
- Length of lease
- Insurance
- Sustainability
- Boundary laundrette – they have been quickly able to amass a large petition – could be an opportunity for a wider discussion of social value.
- What is the next level to take it to.
- Campaign to have a community building run by the CVS
- PDC closing – VS to investigate whether it's possible as lots are looking for premises
- Ship on the Thames (like Canary Wharf Scouts).
- Building provides opportunities to work together
- Relationship building
- Clear policies and process

- Clear comms
- Central body of information
- Free advice re leases (which are legal document)
- Independent legal advice
- Forum
- Partnership support
- Separate team/department to deal with community-focused work. 'Sweating the assets'
- VCS creates stability. Social value. Needs a dedicated team.
- Unified voice
- Question of social value to full council meeting
- CVS to run a space
- Full transparency
- Investing in relationships between VCS and business
- Central body of information about premises
- Free lease/legal advice