



WHITECHAPEL VACANT BUILDINGS REGISTER- CALL FOR SPACES GUIDANCE NOTE

Please note that this document is issued as guidance only and is subject to change and alteration by the Whitechapel Vision Delivery Team

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Whitechapel is at the historic heart of Tower Hamlets but also has a long history of challenges around acute social and economic deprivation. In order to address these issues, the Council in 2012 embarked on the development of a 15 year regeneration masterplan strategy for the area. Known as the 'Whitechapel Vision', its aim is to deliver a convergence agenda that combats adverse issues and delivers tangible social impacts through careful management of the expected economic growth and investment in Whitechapel resulting in part from the arrival of Crossrail. It is the Council's aim that this Vision sets a clear and distinctive strategic direction from the area, supporting future regeneration and sharing the fruits of inward investment with the local community.
- 1.2 To help catalyse the delivery of this masterplan, the Council submitted a bid to the GLA's High Street Fund (HSF) initiative and won funding to be applied to the provision of flexible/affordable workspace in the town centre, tackling a demonstrated lack of such space in the area. The Whitechapel HSF programme will see focussed work with partners to identify currently empty or underused buildings and bring them back into productive space for small- or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The Council will identify suitable spaces in the town centre and, with capital funds from this programme, carry out refurbishment work to deliver spaces of a suitable standard for temporary accommodation.
- 1.3 For the purposes of the Whitechapel HSF project, flexible/affordable workspace will be defined as new or repurposed space to be made accessible to a mix of users for a wide variety of uses, including but not limited to: cultural/creative industries, tech start-ups, media activities and community and non-profit uses, as well as more traditional co-working shared workspaces.
- 1.4 To facilitate the reuse of vacant or underused buildings the Council seeks to create a Vacant Buildings Register. Landowners are invited to submit expressions of interest which will be collated and evaluated by the Whitechapel Vision Delivery Team, with the strategic aim of revitalising the town centre and providing a base of flexible and affordable workspace. This will ensure that the opportunities arising from the HSF programme are made available to a wide variety of local landlords.
- 1.5 In order to create a 'critical mass' of flexible/affordable workspace in the town centre, Round 1 of the Vacant Building Register will focus on buildings with available floorspace of 200sqm / 2150sq ft or greater.

Subsequent rounds may then be rolled out to expand this to smaller units (i.e. individual shopfronts).

- 1.6 Applications to the Vacant Building Register will be assessed with best value for money in mind. This may mean that buildings which require extensive refurbishment to achieve a suitable standard are disqualified, unless the resulting space will present a significant offer which can be shown to add value to the programme generally. The Council will also seek to deliver a suitable mix of flexible/affordable workspace typologies.

2.0 Benefits of temporary occupation

An empty property can cost its owner significant amounts per year in maintenance, utilities charges, business rates and reduced value if its low use or vacancy is causing its deterioration. It can cost even more if it causes a problem to neighbours or if it falls into unauthorised use. An empty property can also attract vandalism, increased risk of fire, unnoticed leaks or damp penetration and on-going security costs. For town centres with vacant or underused buildings, boarded up frontages result in lower footfall and perception problems which impacts negatively on the local community and local businesses.

Temporary occupation of vacant or underused buildings can mitigate many of these issues in the following ways:

- 2.1 **24/7 Security and Building Protection** – Flexible/affordable workspace can provide 24/7 security for buildings which would otherwise lie vacant and remain at risk of unauthorised use or squatting. By providing spaces which may be activated at all hours of the day they provide an added security over other meanwhile uses such as live-in 'Guardian' schemes which may only provide oversight during certain hours of the day and also come with a host of other difficulties, among these the perception of 'boarded up' or abandoned frontages.
- 2.2 **Maintenance** – Spaces to be put into meanwhile use will be refurbished to an appropriate standard for temporary occupation, with the added benefit that buildings will not fall into decay and will be maintained in a useable state. Problematic leaks, infiltrating damp and other issues would be mitigated through occupancy and identified early rather than going unnoticed.
- 2.3 **Health & Safety, Security and Access upgrades** – Works may be undertaken on your property to ensure that health & safety, security and access arrangements are up to required standards before they are occupied by a workspace provider.
- 2.4 **Business rates** – some affordable/flexible workspace providers are registered as charitable entities, allowing these organisations to take on any local business rates responsibilities and subsequently seek mandatory business rate relief. Others would take responsibility for business rates payments themselves or split costs amongst tenants. The Whitechapel Vision team will assist with rates relief where appropriate.
- 2.5 **Utilities and service charges** – It is expected that temporary occupation of units with flexible/affordable workspaces would help to cover the costs

of utilities and services in occupied areas, delivering a significant cost savings for landlords.

- 2.6 **Flexible lease terms and guaranteed handback** – Lease terms with the Council would respond to landowners' redevelopment timescales and would therefore include appropriate break clauses. The Council would then issue sub-leases to workspace providers and manage this relationship, ensuring that site constraints and working requirements are respected and that landlords can enjoy guaranteed handback on vacant/underused spaces.
- 2.7 **Demonstrating alternative uses** – temporary uses may prove useful in trialling variable floorspace arrangements or occupancy, thereby demonstrating the feasibility of alternative or non-traditional uses of buildings.
- 2.8 **Activating frontages** – Through re-animating boarded frontages and increasing footfall the entire area will benefit along with its residents and businesses. A variety of new users in occupied buildings will facilitate the activation of the town centre and will only make any new developments in the area more viable.

3.0 Qualifications for vacant and underused buildings – Round 1

- 3.1 For the first round of the Whitechapel Vacant Buildings Register, properties will need at least **200sqm / 2150 sq ft** of usable space. This requirement may be relaxed in subsequent rounds to include smaller units and vacant shops.
- 3.2 In order to facilitate a self-sustaining and viable affordable workspace offer, properties should be available for a minimum of **two years** but longer terms are welcomed.
- 3.3 Eligible spaces should be connected to standard services (electricity, plumbing, etc). If these are capped off or not in current use, it may be possible to undertake works to restore services subject to funding availability.
- 3.4 Access to flexible workspace areas should be made possible 24/7. Access out of hours would be subject to strict conditions on noise & nuisance, health & safety and security.

4.0 The Council's contribution to temporary use arrangements

- 4.1 The Council, in partnership with the GLA through the Whitechapel High Street Fund, seeks to facilitate the provision of workspace that is as flexible and affordable as possible, and is ideally available for an initial period of at least 2 years.

- 4.2 The Council will seek best value for money at all stages of the Whitechapel HSF Project, and all submissions of interest to the Vacant Buildings Register will be evaluated on this basis.
- 4.3 The Council intends to undertake a competitive process to select appropriate workspace providers for spaces on the Vacant Building Register once these are confirmed. Successful applicants will need to present a viable business case for their operations, a Community Benefits Plan which promotes social cohesion and delivers on project outputs, and supporting documentation including articles of association and evidence of insurance.
- 4.4 If required, funding may be made available through the HSF for refurbishment works to bring spaces up to a standard appropriate for short term occupancy. The scope of refurbishment required will be outlined in partnership with the GLA and in dialogue with workspace providers.
- 4.5 Enabling works will be undertaken where necessary to ensure that health & safety standards are met. Workspace providers will also be required to demonstrate that they hold all necessary insurance before occupation as the Council will not accept health & safety liability for spaces once these are operational.
- 4.6 The Council will lease suitable spaces from landlords and issue operating licenses to workspace providers, to include conditions which ensure that spaces are used and managed appropriately.
- 4.7 The Council will assist in marketing workspaces once these are prepared for temporary accommodation, as well as holding one or more events to promote these meanwhile activities and ensuring that meanwhile uses continue to provide value for money to the local community.

5.0 Next steps / indicative timeline

- Vacant Building Register collated: September 2015
- Competitive process for workspace providers: September/October 2015
- Finalise lease arrangements: Autumn 2015
- Scoping and design work for refurbishments: Autumn 2015
- Delivery of refurbishments and soft furnishings: Autumn/Winter 2015/16
- Occupation of flexible/affordable workspaces: by Spring 2016

6.0 Submission details

Please complete the Vacant Building Register application form in full, ensuring that details are provided therein on the following:

- Floorspace details, including floorplans in editable CAD format, demonstrating areas which are currently vacant
- Access and security arrangements

- Health & Safety details, including requirements and obligations on future occupiers
- A constraints log, including any issues you foresee regarding the provision of flexible workspace

Completed application forms can be sent electronically to David Lee, Project Officer, Whitechapel Vision Delivery Team at David.Lee@towerhamlets.gov.uk

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