

Advice: Promoting affordable workspace to regenerate urban areas

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Affordable workspace can help regenerate urban areas and support enterprise but needs to be genuinely affordable and based in the community, finds Ben Kochan



Empty garages on a housing estate were converted to workspace to create The Trampery's Poplar Works (PIC The Trampery)

Affordable workspace can play an important role in revitalising town centres as well as supporting enterprise in deprived areas. "There are concerns in many places that micro and small businesses are increasingly being priced out of the local property market due to the high rents of workspace and/or prohibitive lease terms," says Emily Berwyn, director of Meanwhile Space, a social enterprise that promotes the reuse of redundant buildings for affordable workspaces.

Local authorities can use their planning powers, properties in their ownership as well as access to grant funding to secure affordable workspace, says Berwyn. "The workspaces have to be in the right location, part of the local community and truly affordable," she urges.

1. Develop local plan policies to secure affordable workspace

Local plan policies can be used to secure affordable workspace. "With the high property costs in London many local councils are inserting policies in their local plans which aim to secure affordable workspace as part of the planning permission for larger business developments," says Patrick Ransom, associate director at property and planning consultancy Avison Young. He adds that councils outside London are also starting to develop affordable workspace planning policies.

The policies generally require that around five or 10 per cent of the new space to be made available at below market rents – generally around 80 per cent of market rents. "If councils want to include an affordable workspace policy in their local plans, they need to put together an evidence base to demonstrate the need for the workspace and that the overall development would still be viable with the affordable space," says Ransom.

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The policies generally are pretty clear that the affordable workspace should be onsite as part of the new development. "This has, however, meant that some of the space is tucked away in the basement of the new development, which is not ideal for small businesses," says Ransom. "Councils should be more prepared to consider contributions from developers to adapt existing space offsite which is more suitable."

2. Adapt unused buildings owned by local authorities

"Councils and other public authorities need to scan their portfolios for buildings that might be simply adapted for small business space," says Andrew Cribb, chief executive of 3Space, which is a social enterprise taking on vacant commercial premises and converting them into affordable workspace.

"Many councils own office blocks or industrial premises which are no longer used and waiting for redevelopment," he says. "The building needs to be in a reasonable state so that adaptation is not expensive and of a decent size to be economic to manage."

Cribb points to the International House scheme in Lambeth, in south London. The 70,000sq ft 12-storey building, close to Brixton town centre, was built in the 1970s and is owned by the local authority and has been turned into a small business centre. Operator 3space has a cross-subsidy model. "For every space taken by a commercial business, a space is given at no cost to a social enterprise or community group," explains Cribb.

"Empty buildings on housing estates can also be turned over for workspaces," says Elad Levy, chief operating officer at The Trampery, a social enterprise which manages workspace. One of its projects is on an estate managed by Poplar HARCA, a housing association that took over ownership of council homes in Tower Hamlets in east London. The housing association regularly surveys its estates to ensure maximum benefit is secured from all the different spaces.

The Trampery has converted disused garages on one of the estates to create 45 workspace for small businesses. It identified with the local community the kind of projects that might be attracted to the space. The scheme was worked up with the London College of Fashion and has attracted jewellery makers and garment designers. "The garages were in a decent physical condition and offer each of the entrepreneurs their own enclosed space with a front door," Levy points out. "The fit out was low cost which meant the new space is really affordable."

"Buildings can be adapted cheaply for affordable workspace on a temporary basis while plans are worked up for a more comprehensive redevelopment of the area," says Gabriel Warshafsky, projects director at Jan Kattein Architects. The practice's scheme for Enfield Council in north London to convert 35 garages on a council owned estate in the borough into workspaces is targeted at young people 18-35 to give them a stake in their local area, Warshafsky explains.

3. Acquire empty retail space in town centres

"Department stores can be quite easily converted into a large number of small workspaces," says Tim Gledstone, a partner at architect Squire & Partners. "The open floorplans and the high ceilings make them adaptable," he continues, adding, "These buildings are often in prominent central locations in city centres and by creating workspaces in them you can bring new life there".

"At ground level you want cafes and meeting places with the workspaces on the upper floors," says Meanwhile Space's Berwyn. She points to Peterborough City Council's scheme for retailer TK Maxx's store in the city centre. The council has secured funding from the government's Towns Fund to convert the space for start-up businesses, meeting rooms, rehearsal studios, a learning resource centre and gallery space for artists and other food and retail related uses.

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