

SPARKS BRISTOL

# A NEW VISION FOR CITY CENTRES:

## LESSONS FROM THE SPARKS PROJECT



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An interim evaluation report about Sparks Bristol  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This interim evaluation report delves into the innovative 'meanwhile use' of urban spaces, a critical response to the revitalisation challenges faced by high streets, amidst financial austerity and the changing landscape of retail and cultural consumption. 'Meanwhile use' refers to the temporary use of empty buildings or land, often in the form of pop-up shops and cafes or community spaces. This report focuses on Sparks Bristol, a project that exemplifies the potential and complexities of temporary adaptations of space in the current economic climate, highlighting the initiative's drive towards sustainability, creativity and circular economic practices.

As high streets evolve beyond traditional retail towards experience-driven and community-focused spaces, projects like Sparks Bristol are emerging as key players in this transformation. They serve as community anchors, not only filling vacant shopfronts but also fortifying community welfare and contributing to the socio-economic fabric during uncertain economic times. This report aims to understand the dynamics of the Sparks project by putting the voices of those managing and utilising these spaces at the forefront of detailing important aspects of their work in order to measure their impact effectively.



The narrative of high street regeneration takes a turn with Sparks Bristol, which has adapted the iconic Marks and Spencer (M&S) building in Broadmead (Bristol city centre) to serve as a hub for artists, education and sustainability, resonating with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This initiative, underpinned by an amalgamation of loans, grants and sponsorships, demonstrates the delicate dance of balancing operational costs while fostering an inclusive community. It underscores the importance of adaptable and appealing spaces in building a community from the ground up in central urban areas.

Moreover, Sparks contributes significantly to the environmental agenda by advocating waste reduction and repair, crafting an ecosystem of partnerships across various sectors, illustrating the tangible social and economic benefits of meanwhile use. For Bristol's art sector Sparks has become a key player, providing essential space and exposure to a diverse range of artists and collectives, nurturing a fertile arts community and driving cultural development, all of which are essential components of a vibrant arts ecosystem.

The report concludes by reflecting on the Sparks project as an exemplar of the transformative capacity of meanwhile use in urban spaces. Its impact on the high streets and arts sector of Bristol demonstrates the necessity for ongoing support and policy attention to initiatives that combine community engagement, cultural production and sustainability



in urban regeneration. Importantly the Sparks project, while ambitious and transformative, faces significant challenges related to resources, governance, space adaptation, balancing public and private interests, responding to wider retail and consumer trends and managing building conditions and legal constraints. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, innovative thinking and a commitment to the project's core vision of sustainability, education and community engagement.

The Sparks interim evaluation, with its participatory action research approach, offers an active, engaged analysis, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive evaluation that encompasses both qualitative and quantitative data to inform broader urban regeneration policies and practices.



# KEY FINDINGS



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**Sparks is dedicated to reshaping the future of high streets by integrating education, arts and culture into traditional retail spaces with a focus on sustainability.**

This initiative, driven by the collective vision of key stakeholders such as Artspace Lifespace, Global Goals Centre, Bristol City Council and the landlord (M&S), aims to cultivate a vibrant community of local creatives, makers and learners focused on sustainability.



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**Sparks's success hinges on robust collaborations and partnerships.**

It draws from a broad network that includes the local council, universities, independent and local businesses, charities and individuals. This collective effort has created a strong community presence that is integral to the project's impact.

**Sparks is supported by a versatile financial model.**

This model taps into various funding streams including sponsorships, grants and pro bono contributions, which ensure its sustainability. Strategic financial planning and partnerships with landlords are crucial in overcoming the challenges of temporary occupancy and management of vacant properties.



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**Sparks utilises innovative spatial adaptations.**

The project's design and layout focus on future living practices, showcasing a theme of 'home', with green and queer atmosphere for co-existence of different users, facilitating accessibility of diverse, otherwise at the margin, communities while maintaining footfall of the existing diverse users of the city centre.

**Sparks has drawn significant numbers of visitors and actively engaged the local community.**

It has done so through a variety of workshops, partnerships and events. The project is noted for its environmental and educational efforts, significantly reducing waste and enhancing sustainability, while also making a profound social impact through volunteer work and support for numerous partner organisations and community groups.

**Sparks has profoundly influenced Bristol's arts scene.**

It has done so by providing essential spaces for artists and collectives, thereby fostering artistic growth and visibility. The project's commitment to social causes and community engagement is reflected in its support for various arts and charity organisations.

**Sparks has been successful in creating an engaging, educational and community-focused environment.**

Feedback from visitors and partners underscores this and recommendations for future development include

expanding activities and educational offerings and upgrading infrastructure to support diverse interactions.

**Sparks requires continuous resource acquisition.**

This demands creative funding solutions and ongoing support. Balancing the complexities of its diverse partnerships and stakeholder engagement is challenging but essential for the project's sustained success.

**Sparks maintains open and effective communication with all stakeholders.**

This is critical yet challenging given the project's extensive reach and diverse partnerships. Consistent collaborative governance and innovative strategies are necessary to manage this complexity effectively.

**Sparks's flexible use of space is crucial.**

However, it comes with uncertainties particularly concerning the building's health and safety measures and lease agreements with the landlord.

**Sparks strikes a balance between fostering public engagement and sustaining private operations.**

Located in Bristol city centre, it is a delicate task to balance public/visible and private/affordable uses, making venues accessible - physically and socially - for enhancing community cultural engagement. It requires meticulous planning and agile execution. The project strives to be inclusive while managing its commercial aspects - such as venue hire and retail operations - requiring continuous reflection and innovation.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Develop a more nuanced and flexible evaluation framework.

This recommendation is sector-wide signalling a need to effectively assess the impacts of meanwhile use spaces, considering their temporary nature and the diversity of stakeholders involved. This involves moving beyond standard frameworks to adapt to the unique challenges and dynamics of each space. Importantly indicating the types of data that need to be collected from and before the project commences can be tremendously beneficial.

## Prioritise the engagement of all stakeholders involved in meanwhile use projects, from policymakers to community members and creative workers.

This includes facilitating open communication channels, involving stakeholders in decision-making processes and ensuring their voices and needs are considered in project development.



## Adjust urban planning and policy to support the flexible use of vacant spaces and ensure sustainability in these initiatives.

This could involve modifying use-class regulations, a guideline on matching vacant properties with different types and demands of use, simplifying the permitting process, transparency of all costs in occupying vacant properties - including legal fees and encouraging policies that support economic and community-oriented initiatives.

## Highlight and prioritise the social and cultural benefits of meanwhile use.

This is important to ensure that projects contribute to community bonding, enhance the local cultural scene and support grassroots initiatives. This aligns with the broader goals of urban regeneration and social cohesion.

## Develop strategies to mitigate the challenges posed by the inherent temporary nature of meanwhile spaces.

These include instability for users and the potential for contributing to gentrification. This might include creating pathways to longer-term leases or permanent community spaces where successful.

## Tie meanwhile use projects into broader economic development strategies that can help sustain them financially.

This could involve integrating these projects into local economic plans, encouraging public-private partnerships and exploring innovative funding models.

## Utilise meanwhile spaces as hubs for education and sustainability, aligning with global goals like the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This approach not only addresses environmental concerns but also educates the public on wider issues of social need and inclusion issues, enhancing the project's impact.

## Design and manage meanwhile use projects in ways that ensure they are inclusive and accessible to diverse populations, including those with disabilities.

This enhances the social value of the spaces and ensures they serve the entire community.

## Support and promote art and cultural activities within meanwhile spaces to boost the local arts scene and provide artists with essential resources and visibility.

This can help nurture local talent and enrich the community's cultural landscape.

## Approach the development and management of meanwhile use projects holistically, considering the interplay of social, economic and environmental factors.

This includes recognising the multiple functions these spaces can serve - from retail and art to community gatherings and educational programmes.





# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 ABOUT THIS REPORT

Amidst austerity, budget cuts and the cost-of-living crisis, high street landlords, developers and policy makers are turning to the 'meanwhile use' of premises for cultural production and consumption to regenerate declining high streets. 'Meanwhile use' refers to the temporary use of empty buildings (often retail) or land, often in the form of pop-up shops and eateries or community spaces. In our case M&S allowed their flagship shop in Bristol to be utilised as a community hub. Temporary adaptation and management of buildings in the form of meanwhile use can have a positive impact on both high streets and cultural and creative workers and organisations. However, there are particularities within this framing that can also exacerbate high street regeneration challenges. As such, while important research in this area exists, more work is needed to show how the use of meanwhile space to enhance high streets is achievable. Evaluation plays an important role, however standardised evaluation frameworks for meanwhile spaces and their impact are rare. This is not surprising given that evaluating temporary spaces is a difficult proposition due to the precarity and uncertainty which many organisations tasked to run such spaces find themselves in due to shifting policy as well as private sector priorities. Meanwhile spaces are

context dependent and as such moving targets, hence delivering a standardised evaluation framework is a difficult proposition especially since they must justify their existence to several different stakeholders with different goals and aims in mind. As such this report utilises learnings from previous work regarding the methodologies adopted here while also acknowledging the complexity involved in evaluating such projects. What is central here, and what evaluation strategies used thus far can uncover, whether standardised or not, is what these organisations have been able to achieve in such a short period of time and in the face of what can seem like insurmountable challenges.

Sparks Bristol provides a unique opportunity to envisage the important parameters of models of meanwhile use as it aims to showcase practices of sustainability, creativity and circular economy within the context of shifting priorities, budget cuts and an overall sense of 'what next/where next?'. The aims of this report are: to understand the goals and needs of the different stakeholders involved in the Sparks project who are dedicated to delivering a sustainable creative project; to amplify the voices and experiences of those managing and running meanwhile spaces; and to formulate a useful account (as opposed to framework) that can be used as a barometer for assessing progress and success as they pertain to impact.



## 1.2 CONTEXT

For several decades, the traditional high street model - which was formerly mostly supported by retail establishments - has been steadily declining (Hubbard, 2017). Foot traffic to typical high street retailers has been diverted by the rise of online shopping and the development of large out-of-town shopping centres in the late 1970s (Lee and Swann, 2020). The high street experienced a further shock driven by the 2008 financial crisis, which was evidenced by Mary Portas' influential high street review in 2011 where she cited the large number of empty shop spaces becoming more and more prevalent across the United Kingdom (Portas, 2011). To fill the gap left by the declining and changing business models of retail giants, many high streets adjusted by turning their attention to the 'experience economy' and added eateries, coffee

shops and other services mainly for consumption (Lee and Swann, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic's arrival then brought new difficulties for the high street, jeopardising the immediate survival of businesses and casting doubts on the long-term viability of restaurants and social venues due to social distancing measures - the effects of which we are still seeing now (Enoch et al., 2022); and which have been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. More recently there has been a policy shift in support of production and consumption activities as opposed to mainly consumption as evidenced by the emergence of different types of 'hubs' and other kinds of grassroots organisations and initiatives as potential catalysts for regeneration (see: Virani, 2019). These have been primarily led by local grassroots creative and cultural organisations who prioritise civic and community engagement. Operationally, 'pop-up'



(highly short term) and 'meanwhile space' (short to medium term) use of space are being tried and tested to alleviate the blight of underused retail space on the high street (see: Madanipour, 2017; O'Hara and Naik, 2021).

The decline of high streets has significant social and economic impacts, as they are not only commercial hubs but also places that foster social bonds, collective identity and communal experiences (Lee and Swann, 2020). The preference for large retail chains, often supported by policy choices, has resulted in high streets that are less resilient, diverse and sustainable (Lee and Swann, 2020). A key topic of current debate is the shift away from a focus on retail to enhancing community engagement, which was historically the role of high streets serving dual roles in civic and commercial life (Dobson, 2015). Recent government documents stress the need for community participation in high street redevelopment, with a shift towards creating spaces for activities and gatherings rather than prioritising retail (Ministry of Housing,

Communities, and Local Government Report, 2021). Yet, there are few examples of such transformations of high streets and city centres, through which historic values and physical environments could respond to current challenges while offering innovative futures.

Initiatives such as Sparks Bristol underscore the importance of community-driven solutions for the future of high streets. These models not only help reduce vacant shopfronts but also contribute to community prosperity and stability, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. However, they are under threat of closure constantly - despite the fact that Sparks Bristol has recently successfully been able to secure a two-year lease (as of the time of writing this report). The questions and implications of 'what next/where next' and how to deal with change are constant, highlighting the need for policy makers to think carefully about the time allotted to such endeavours and the impact this has on those visionaries who are at the coalface of fluctuating neoliberal urban policies.





### 1.3 MEANWHILE BRISTOL

Bristol City Centre and nine (out of 47) of the city's high streets have been prioritised for receiving support for recovery and renewal from the local authority - £2M of the Covid Capital Recovery Fund and £2.725M from the West of England Combined Authority's (WECA) Love our High Streets programme. The aims of these programmes are not only supporting high streets impacted by lockdown measures, but also diversifying activities, increasing footfall and encouraging visitors into the local economy.

Meanwhile/pop-up uses are part of Bristol City Council's (BCC) strategy. This is not the first initiative by BCC to support art and cultural practices which help in reanimating the high street. Pop-up shops and temporary uses are prevalent in Bristol, and

their history aligns with the broader emergence of the concept in retail and the creative industries, which gained momentum in the early 2000s. Initially, temporary use of vacant properties or land in Bristol is associated with seasonal events and festivals, with a successful and popular reputation in the country; or linked with radical artists, squatters, or creatives, amplifying Bristol's anti-establishment model of practice. Yet the concept has evolved to accommodate entrepreneurs and independent artists, providing more visibility to them, and using some of the public spaces to attract a broader spectrum of society to such activities. Over time, pop-ups in Bristol diversified in terms of location and offerings, from vacant buildings and shopfronts to plots of land awaiting regeneration, and from festivals and events to food, art studios and cultural offerings. Looking back to some of these temporary uses (such



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as Bristol Urban Beach, The Island, Creative Common, Pro-Cathedral in Clifton transformed into a temporary performance venue or street art festival See No Evil) the provision of land, mostly owned by the council, diversified sources of funding (public and private), a focus on community leisure and recreation, are shared aspects among them.

Temporary schemes have been generally set up by BCC and Arts Council England (ACE) to reimagine places and activate them by supporting events mostly run by grassroots and cultural organisations. During and after the pandemic, the number and types of such schemes grew to support independent businesses, charities, community interest companies (CICs), community and voluntary groups, social enterprises, and sole traders for

different lease periods. However, to be eligible for such schemes, organisations must meet different criteria and have a business plan ready to use the time effectively. It is also important to highlight that the city centre is a priority as it is viewed as the economic and cultural hub of the city. It is also mostly negatively affected by the latest economic crisis. However, this does not justify the lack of investment in community cultural spaces and events, where access to art and culture is low. Looking back at a few reports reflecting on temporary use in Bristol such as the one initiated by Creative Common in 2013 (Hagan, 2014), making places more attractive and safer is a shared goal, as is sustainable revenue and further community inclusion. These initiatives are mostly built with local resources, both in terms of materials supporting 'zero to landfill' initiatives and independent businesses.



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## 1.4 SPARKS BRISTOL

The Sparks project is a collaboration between Artspace Lifespace (ASLS) and Global Goals Centre (GGC) who have just secured a two-year lease (at the time of writing this report) on the Marks and Spencer building in Bristol Broadmead. ASLS is an arts charity with a long-lasting reputation of managing unique venues to provide affordable spaces for artists to make, develop and showcase their work. They offer a mix of artists' studios and space for exhibitions, filming, events, rehearsal and independent retail across Bristol venues: The Island, The Vestibules, Broadmead XP (The Galleries), Sparks Bristol and the Arts Mansion in North Somerset. Global Goals Centre (GGC) is an education

charity with global ambitions inspired by the UN Sustainable Development Goals; they work with partners to promote creative solutions and deliver projects. Unlike ASLS, Sparks Bristol is the first opportunity for GGC to have a physical presence in the city. The collaboration between these two organisations in the creation and development of Sparks Bristol has been instrumental in several ways as this report will show.

Broadmead is a street in the central area of Bristol, England, which has given its name to the principal shopping district of the city. It is part of the Bristol Shopping Quarter and has experienced significant decline in the past decade, more so since the pandemic.

Flagship department stores such as Debenhams and Marks and Spencer have decided to close operations in Broadmead adding to a blighted corner of this important shopping district (see: BBC, January 8th, 2022; Bristol Live, May 15th, 2021). The Marks and Spencer building is a flagship store including four storeys of significantly large retail space.

The agreement by the landlords as well as policy makers including the Bristol Business Improvement District and BCC to welcome an innovative, creative and sustainable proposal by ASLS and GGC to take place for a given time, is a significant policy step forward regarding the common practices of meanwhile use in this way

and in this type of location. Sparks officially opened on May 13th, 2023 and provides artist studios, residencies and rehearsal and performance space in the upper floors of the building and an arts and sustainability hub on the ground floor. It is a reimagining of a department store featuring practical and affordable ways to tackle climate change, inequality and poverty as articulated through the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Sparks introduces a novel model of use to high streets and the city centre by combining educational activities and events, cultural production and consumption and sustainable retail - all in a significantly and challengingly large space.







## 2.0 MEANWHILE USE

### 2.1 DEFINING MEANWHILE USE<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile use, defined as the temporary occupation of vacant or underutilised spaces for creative, cultural or community activities, can play a significant role in countering the decline of high streets. Jess Steele (2012) introduces the concept of 'meanwhile use' as a policy, programme and philosophy, alongside the launch of the Meanwhile Foundation, a national charity aimed at promoting and facilitating the effective use of land and buildings for social and economic benefits in local communities. The foundation collaborates with local authorities and strategic partners to support neighbourhood-level meanwhile activities. The motivation behind this movement is evident in the numerous empty shops across town centres, which contribute to the perception of 'ghost towns' and exacerbate urban decline by deterring shoppers, thus triggering a self-reinforcing cycle of deprivation. Meanwhile use aims to prevent this by keeping properties active and secure, introducing vibrancy, encouraging innovation, making efficient use of

resources and providing opportunities for people and organisations. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of ongoing economic uncertainty, suggesting a shift towards a 'new normal' where meanwhile use is embedded in property development and planning processes, ensuring that temporary solutions contribute to long-term community resilience and urban revitalisation. What is less explored about the use of 'meanwhile' is their process:

*"Despite the unpredictable nature of the journey, the process itself needs to be choreographed. In choreographing the process, the designer will, at times, have to be prepared to concentrate on creating the conditions rather than the solutions."* (Bishop and Williams, 2012 p. 216).

What are the social and financial conditions to set these projects up? What visions and business models work? How flexible is the governance model? We will focus on these conditions later in this report but first demonstrate what is known as pros and cons of meanwhile projects.

<sup>1</sup> This section examines the pertinent academic and report-based literature on meanwhile space in mainly the United Kingdom. For a more comprehensive reading list of work on meanwhile space as well as other aspects of temporary use see the Meanwhile Foundation's reading list here: [meanwhile.org.uk/pages/94-reading-list](https://meanwhile.org.uk/pages/94-reading-list)



## 2.2 THE POSITIVES OF MEANWHILE USE

Meanwhile use can act as a catalyst for local economies, drawing visitors, supporting local businesses and facilitating economic activities with initiatives like pop-up shops and markets (Milliken, 2014). So, as an urban strategy, it creates footfall and contributes positively to the regeneration and revitalisation of the area. It provides unique opportunities for entrepreneurs and serves as a platform for testing new business models. By involving residents in the redevelopment process, meanwhile use can strengthen community ties, foster a sense of belonging and create a positive social impact. It can transform urban spaces into communal hubs, encouraging active participation in the shaping of local

areas (Cassidy and Resnick, 2022). By providing affordable space to artists and makers, temporary projects have the potential to convert high streets into dynamic cultural spaces, hosting art installations, galleries and performances. This not only enhances the area's cultural identity but also promotes creativity and diversity within the community (Ball and Essex, 2013). Finally, recognising the socio-cultural and economic impact, stakeholders, including developers and local authorities, are increasingly integrating meanwhile use into broader urban development strategies. This approach ensures that temporary uses contribute constructively to the urban fabric, serving as a precursor to permanent development and enhancing the functionality and responsiveness of future spaces (Dutton and Armstrong, 2012).



## 2.3 CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

The inherent temporariness of meanwhile use projects can lead to uncertainty, affecting long-term business planning and community stability, which of course can have negative impacts on the physical and mental wellbeing of those at the coalface of these projects. Implementation necessitates a delicate balance between flexibility and sustainability in urban planning (Ferreri, 2015). Those implementing temporary initiatives often encounter bureaucratic resistance and a lack of funding, which can slow down or even halt projects. Organisers must repurpose buildings with often low infrastructure, while being flexible to user's ways and conditions of work (Karimnia, 2023). Financial uncertainties of meanwhile projects cannot only affect the organisers, but also users of the spaces - independent businesses, artists and cultural producers - who are impacted by

either lack of funding to afford a space, or lack of time or knowledge to apply for funding. Hence, financial uncertainty and lack of affordable space have perpetuated the already precarious conditions for art and cultural production. There is no time for social impact, such as enhancing professional network and community ties, as their promise, but also no headspace to plan for their long-term impact. Overcoming these obstacles requires innovative policy solutions and collaborative efforts among stakeholders (Patti and Polyak, 2015). Lastly, critics argue that the promotion of meanwhile use might align too closely with neoliberal urban agendas, potentially overlooking the broader contributions of these spaces to community life and urban placemaking. There is a concern that the transformative potential of meanwhile use could be undermined if co-opted by mainstream development practices focused on profit rather than community value (Tonkiss, 2013; Moore-Cherry, 2017).



## 2.4 POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Meanwhile use can serve as a potent act of resistance against processes such as gentrification, offering an alternative narrative for urban redevelopment. By prioritising community needs and creative expression, these spaces challenge conventional development models and can promote inclusivity (Leysen, 2018). Embracing a DIY ethos, temporary cultural production spaces like art spaces provide a sanctuary for creative expression free from the constraints of the mainstream art world. This movement not only has the potential to democratise artmaking but also questions the prevailing values of neoliberal capitalism, advocating for a more equitable and accessible cultural landscape (Butler, 2017).

## 2.5 ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Meanwhile use has proven effective in transforming brownfield sites and neglected areas into vibrant community spaces. These projects not only improve the aesthetic and economic value of neighbourhoods but also create job opportunities and foster community engagement, illustrating the multifaceted benefits of temporary uses in urban regeneration (Hill et al., 2013). However, transitioning temporary projects into long-term solutions remains a challenge. Ensuring the sustainability and legacy of meanwhile use initiatives is crucial for achieving lasting impacts on urban regeneration and community resilience. This requires a concerted effort to integrate temporary projects into comprehensive urban planning strategies, ensuring they contribute to the long-term vitality of the urban environment (Madanipour, 2017).



## 2.6 RECENT EVALUATIONS

Meanwhile use projects, due to their temporary, often flexible and experimental nature, are complex ecosystems; the relationships between space, people and resources constantly change to help these ecosystems sustain themselves. Evaluation of such processes is done differently based on the stage of the process. This section provides an overview of past evaluation reports that focus on meanwhile use. The evaluation strategies employed in the reports documented here - with the focus on community-led high street regeneration projects - reveal a diverse approach to assessing their impact, benefits and challenges. These strategies include quantitative data analysis, surveys, stakeholder interviews and case studies, each offering insights into the multifaceted outcomes of such initiatives.

### 2.6.1 Evaluation strategies and their implications

*Meanwhile Space: Ten Years in Practice* (Palaiologou, 2019) uses a comprehensive approach that combines data on projects, surveys of stakeholders and socioeconomic analysis. This strategy allows for a detailed examination of the impact on tenants, landlords and local communities, assessing economic returns, employment effects and business diversity. A strength of this approach is its inclusivity and depth, providing a nuanced understanding of meanwhile use's socioeconomic impact. However, its reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, and the diverse nature of projects could complicate the aggregation of results.

*Meanwhile Use London* (Bosetti and Colthorpe, 2020) incorporates stakeholder interviews and case studies to map business models





and challenges, linking findings to broader urban resilience themes. This qualitative emphasis offers rich, narrative insights into the operational and strategic facets of meanwhile use, particularly post-pandemic. The case studies deepen the understanding of practical challenges and successes, though the study may face limitations in generalisability and quantification of impact.

*Learning from Others* (Clark et al., 2018) leverages interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and reviews of financial models across four case studies. This method highlights the importance of considering social, environmental and economic factors in success measures. The broad stakeholder perspective is a strength, ensuring a rounded view of impacts. However, the focus on a limited number of case studies might not capture the full diversity of meanwhile use practices.

*Meanwhile, in London: Making Use of London's Empty Spaces* (Bosetti and Colthorpe, 2018) employs a mixed-methods approach, including desk research, site visits and surveys. This triangulation enhances the reliability of findings regarding the value and challenges of meanwhile use. A significant strength is the attempt to quantify the extent of meanwhile space, providing a tangible metric for impact. Yet, the barriers identified, such as market immaturity and misaligned perceptions, suggest the need for wider stakeholder engagement and awareness-raising.

*The Restorative High Street Project* (Howard et al., 2022) and *Saving the High Street: The Community Takeover* (Lee and Swann, 2020) both emphasise community involvement and the qualitative impact on local areas. These reports focus on ethnographic interviewing and case studies to explore the roles of community businesses in high street

regeneration. While offering valuable insights into community engagement and social utility, these studies may lack the quantitative metrics needed to evaluate economic impact comprehensively.

### **2.6.2 Strengths and weaknesses of evaluation strategies**

Across these reports, a key strength is the multifaceted approach to understanding the complex impacts of meanwhile use and community-led regeneration projects. The incorporation of qualitative data through interviews and case studies provides depth and context, revealing the nuanced challenges and opportunities of such initiatives. However, a common weakness is the

potential difficulty in quantifying impacts, particularly in terms of economic returns and long-term sustainability. Additionally, the reliance on stakeholder perceptions could introduce bias and limit the objectivity of findings. Each meanwhile project is unique thus standardised evaluations, or even stages of work, can be different from case to case.

Overall, these evaluation strategies underscore the critical need for diverse methods to capture the full spectrum of impacts from meanwhile use and community-led high street regeneration. They highlight the importance of both qualitative and quantitative data in assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives in revitalising urban spaces.







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## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The reviewed literature and existing evaluations on meanwhile use informed our approach towards exploring the underlying conditions - including governance and financial models - that affect the dynamic of such practices. We therefore decided to use qualitative methods as well as taking an active role to be able to navigate how this project operates, is managed and is sustained on an everyday basis - as well as what conditions support or threaten its future. We also relied on primary data collected by Sparks, who had the foresight to document their journey by collecting important data.

Importantly, this evaluation is an interim evaluation. An interim evaluation takes place during a project or programme, typically at predetermined intervals or milestones. It provides an opportunity to assess progress, identify emerging issues and adjust as needed. Whereas a full evaluation occurs after the completion of a project or programme, which in the case of meanwhile spaces can be difficult to determine. The primary purpose of an interim evaluation is to ask important questions throughout the project as it pertains to not just the evaluation but ongoing operational tasks as well as next steps.

Our journey conducting this interim evaluation project began in its early stages which allowed us a rare opportunity to witness the dynamics of the project before the door of

the physical space opened to the public. We understood the level of uncertainty of meanwhile projects and the risks taken to make decisions on the governance and finances of the project while making the building ready to use. The dynamics within these practices are complex as they rely on financial conditions, governance and organisational adaptive capacity as well as spatial qualities and existing infrastructure; these conditions are not fixed especially with regards to making the building fit for purpose.

We must, however, emphasise our constrained time and budget for this interim evaluation - as is almost always the case. Additional resources would have enabled us to understand the dynamics of the process more fully through greater involvement in the project's daily activities. This would have likely included participating in various community events or attending meetings where decisions were made, thereby gaining insights into unforeseen challenges, potential tensions and the overall setting. Furthermore, investigating the interaction between Sparks and local businesses around Broadmead to determine any impacts on these businesses throughout the project's duration would have been valuable. Another critical aspect to consider is the effect of extending or terminating the lease by the landlord and the organisations' future and their wellbeing.



### 3.1 PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

This interim evaluation used a 'participatory action research' (PAR) approach to research that involves active participation from those affected by the issue being studied - although as stated budget and time constraints affected this. In PAR, researchers collaborate with stakeholders, such as community members, organisations, or individuals impacted by a particular problem or situation, to collectively identify, design, implement and evaluate interventions or solutions. This was achieved through the use of the evaluation workshop discussed later, as well as meetings and through the interviewing process as we constructed our narrative for the interim evaluation.

### 3.2 INTERVIEWS

Conducting interviews with key personnel serves multiple purposes in an interim evaluation, including gathering information, understanding stakeholder perspectives, exploring complex issues, validating findings, identifying barriers and facilitators, building relationships and informing decision-making. As such, we conducted 20 interviews with different key stakeholders, each with a different role in the delivery of the Sparks project, including ASLS, GCC, artist tenants, sustainable retailers, external stakeholders, BCC culture development and regeneration, and the charities involved.

### 3.3 EVALUATION WORKSHOP

Within six months of Sparks officially opening their doors, we conducted an evaluation workshop with key stakeholders to reflect on the process, learnings, and the project performance so far. The workshop was organised by our research team in collaboration with Futureground. The objective of this workshop was to engage in a collective exploration of the project's progress, challenges and opportunities for Bristol's future socio-cultural and economic development. We provided an overview of the project's goals, achievements and status, particularly at a time when the initial lease was about to end in two months, and informal conversations were around the extension of the lease for two more years. The key stakeholders engaged in the activities and discussions which were designed to elicit insights, experiences and suggestions around three themes: the use of the building



- spatial adaptation and visibility; uncertainty - balancing time and stability; priorities - balancing decisions for sustaining as well as experimenting. The outcome of the workshop was gathered as valuable reflections shared with the organisers and provided them with ideas and materials to be implemented. The workshop also provided a platform among different stakeholders to discuss the project via different perspectives and scales of action. The outcome also informed the interim evaluation.

### 3.4 DATA COLLECTION AND SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Aside from the data collected through interviews and the workshop the Sparks organisers have collected their own data to measure the impacts of Sparks on their users, including the number of visitors daily, minority communities hosted in Sparks and their progress, as well as workshops and other important data.







# 4.0 SPARKS BRISTOL: AN INNOVATIVE URBAN EXPERIMENT

## 4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF A SHARED VISION

The vision for rejuvenating the high street with a meanwhile project emphasised creating a new, equitable future that transcends traditional shopping and consumption-focused models - this is the aim. The partnership between ASLS and GGC was initially brought about through Bristol City Council (BCC) who insisted

that they wanted this to be 'more than just retail'. BCC brokered the partnership for ASLS and GGC to take over the building which was initially owned and operated by Marks and Spencer (M&S - Landlord herein). The landlord also agreed on the shared vision across the workspace providers as well as the Local Authority. This combination of a shared vision by these stakeholders was an important catalyser for Sparks.



“Global Goals Centre is an education charity based on the Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and we always wanted to have a physical hub in Bristol. It was around the Sustainable Development Goals and bringing them to life...so we would run education activities, but it's also for the general public, to discover what the goals are and how they could actually take action on them in their everyday life. So it's effectively around inspiring people to change behaviour for good.”

Jenny, GGC





“Our trustees had an initial meeting to talk, and then we (GGC and ASLS) had sat down together to have a big discussion about what our shared mission and values were. And it was just amazing. It was one of those meetings where you know you were with the perfect partner. And we were, we had such a shared vision. Of what we wanted to get out of this property that we said, well, let’s approach this in partnership.”

Kat, ASLS

This vision proposes a transformative approach by integrating education, art and culture into the high street, aiming to foster a community of local creatives, makers and learners with an eye to sustainability as it is articulated through the UN SDGs. This initiative not only sought to demystify sustainable living but also to repurpose architecturally significant buildings facing decline.

The partnership between ASLS and GGC was galvanised by leveraging their extensive experience and networks to mobilise support, secure funding, and navigate uncertainties. This collaboration extends to property owners, aiming to achieve the project’s goals through a shared understanding and alignment of interests. The project is characterised by a holistic approach

to governance and space management, balancing public engagement with private operations and ensuring inclusivity through collective decision-making.

The ambitious scope of the project presents several challenges however, including the need for substantial resources, the complexity of sustaining diverse partnerships and activities, and issues related to transparency and communication with stakeholders. These challenges underscore the importance of a clear vision, collaborative governance, and innovative spatial strategies in regenerating the high street and shaping a future that values diversity, education, and sustainable living. The project vision was well recognised and appreciated by funders.

“It [the vision] was very broad, it was cross sector, it was local, you know, local movers and shakers it was. And then it was grassroots [...] coupled with one of our priorities being improving the places and spaces that matter to people.”

Funders from National Lottery



“I want to say compared to how Marks and Spencer used this space, it’s being used 100% better because everyone gets to see what’s going on and what they can do to make life better for kids and for themselves. And plus when it was Marks and Spencer there was a lot of those food shops, a lot of those clothes shops, this is unique, using the space to bring awareness to everybody. It surely brought awareness to me. I didn’t know this exists. I’m looking around and thinking I could save this, I could save that. I could come and look at the clothes and save some money there. The food is great because I’m vegan and I can see a lot of vegan stuff, and I can see a lot of stuff for myself especially the Seville orange. Oh I’ve searched all over Bristol for Seville oranges and I’m coming back to do my shopping!”

Visitor from Brislington



## 4.2 COLLABORATIONS, PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS

Collaborations and partnerships as they pertain to drawing in (and on) networks played a crucial role in ensuring Sparks got off the ground. We have established that a clear vision is essential for attracting multiple partnerships, guiding the project's governance and balancing between uncertainties and day-to-day operations. Trust forms the foundation of these collaborations,

with partners sharing experiences, skills, and knowledge while dividing managerial responsibilities. This fosters a pluralistic community voice that includes sponsors, visitors, regular users and audiences, facilitating collective decision-making and creating a community of practice. The project collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders including the council, property owners through agents, universities, researchers, students, schools, local businesses, charities and organisations supporting migrants and refugees.

“ASLS has developed a reputation in Bristol for taking on challenging buildings and transforming them for creative use. In May 2022 we were approached by Hammond Associates about taking on a lease of the former M&S building in Broadmead. By July we were negotiating the final terms of the lease with the property team when we heard on the grapevine that 'Globechain' a Reuse Marketplace was interested in taking on the store. Meanwhile another Bristol based charity was in conversation with Bristol City Council about taking on the empty store. At the time they were told that East Street Arts was interested in taking on the store. Somewhere along the grapevine however, information had become lost in translation. Bristol City Council helped facilitate introductions to Global Goals Centre and Artspace Lifespace and we decided to meet and see how we could help each other achieve our aims.”

Kat, ASLS



“It was exciting working with Artspace Lifespace and determining that Sparks Bristol could still fulfil the needs of the people of Bristol who loved the Marks and Spencer store we were replacing, but could be a department store with a difference. It was massively inspiring to have the support of organisations from across the city. At that first meeting we were joined by ACH, A Single Thread, Avon Wildlife Trust, Bricks Bristol / St Anne's House, Better Events, Bristol & Bath R&D / MyWorld, Bristol City Council, Bristol Energy Co-op, Bristol Energy Network, Bristol Food Network, Bristol Green Capital Partnership, Bristol Waste, Bristol Zoo, Brunswick Club, Business West, Creative Youth Network, Centre for Sustainable Energy, Dhaqan Collective, Diverse Arts Network, GP & West of England Nature, House of Savalon, LetUsGrow, Library of Things, Invisible Circus, Materials in Mind, Pervasive Media Studio - Watershed, POD, PRSC, Repair Cafe, Sustainable Hive, Sustrans, University of Bristol, YesIDub Creations, WECA.”

Jenny, GGC

The involvement of Hammond and Associates as a charitable agent highlights the project's commitment to addressing logistical challenges, including health and safety measures and communication issues related to the property.

A key partnership was with The Invisible Circus. The Invisible Circus is a collective based in Bristol, known for their innovative and immersive theatrical performances, events and community arts projects. Originating in the late 1990s, the group has evolved from performing in squatted buildings and public spaces to establishing more permanent venues and participating in large-scale festivals and events. The collective is characterised by its unique blend of circus arts, theatre, live music and visual artistry, creating captivating experiences that often incorporate audience participation and blur the lines between performers

and spectators. Their performances are known for addressing social and political themes, exploring the human condition and celebrating the spirit of community and collaboration. The Invisible Circus has played a significant role in revitalising disused and derelict spaces in Bristol and beyond, transforming them into vibrant cultural hubs and venues for the arts. One of their most notable projects is the transformation of the Old Fire Station in Bristol into an arts and performance space, showcasing the collective's commitment to community and urban regeneration. They converted the old M&S building into Sparks on a meagre budget and using recycled materials wherever possible.

Education is a significant aspect of the project, aiming to develop tools and platforms for fair and inclusive education on the climate crisis. Global Goals Centre has established



relationships with schools and universities, designing programmes and workshops in Sparks to facilitate learning from creative installations. It also collaborates with researchers from the University of the West of England to enhance its educational programmes and engages students in research and dissertations.

Artists and creatives at the margins of the creative industry, including recent graduates, refugees and migrant artists, are provided with workspace on the upper floors by ASLS. This

initiative not only offers them space but also a platform to raise awareness of their work.

Since its inception, Sparks has attracted attention from professionals nationwide due to its scale, unique vision, location on the high street and occupancy of a listed building. Experts from various sectors, including city councils, universities and property owners have engaged with the project, reflecting its broad appeal and the importance of collaborative efforts in achieving its vision.



## CASE STUDY: CALCIFER COLE, SPARKS TRADER

“I am one of the traders at the Ethical Gift Shop and I would say Sparks and the Ethical Gift Shop has impacted my little business amazingly. When I started my little business in 2021 I was finishing university and I got told by my head of course that my work would never amount to anything. So when I finished uni (and I came out of it with COVID), I had no contacts, I had no confidence. And I had no idea what to do with my degree.

Then earlier this year I applied to stock through the Ethical Gift Shop thinking 'well it's something' and within a month I got told that my stuff sold out. I got told I'm one of the top three earners! I've had people ask for my contacts and message me and be like: "Oh I love your stuff can I get a commission? I love this sticker I bought can I have it as a tattoo?" and it's genuinely amazed me and given me so much confidence.

Considering that I went from ending uni being told that I'm not going to get anywhere to thinking 'oh wow, I can actually make a career out of my artwork!' I would genuinely thank the people at Sparks and especially Sam and Al at the Ethical Gift Shop for providing this opportunity and this new supportive community for me. Thank you.”

Calcifer Cole, Sparks Trader





## CASE STUDY: GLENFROME PRIMARY SCHOOL

**Teacher:** "We're from Glenfrome Primary School and our Year Fours visited Sparks recently for the Fashion to Field workshop and from a teaching perspective it was fantastic because it slotted in with what we were learning through our curriculum, but it was still really engaging and exciting. Some of the children have been thinking about what they learned and what their favourite parts were:"

**Child 1:** "I learnt to be careful with my clothes and give them to others when I don't need them."

**Child 2:** "We learnt that there were enough clothes for four generations so we learnt how to sew so we can repair our clothes."

**Child 3:** "We have learnt lots of great facts and how important it is to reuse things."

**Child 4:** "My favourite thing was the wishing well. We liked the tour. There was a house that showed everything that was going extinct. We have to help the environment so that doesn't happen."

**Teacher:** "It was quite a while ago that we went, so it's really stuck with them and it's definitely something that we're going to keep on incorporating into our school trips. Hopefully we'll be there again next year."

## 4.3 CREATIVE FINANCING

The innovative financial model underpinning Sparks is a multifaceted approach designed to realise their vision, with high street impact through diverse funding sources and strategic financial planning. This model leverages multiple financial streams and partnerships, offering a broad spectrum of legal opportunities for business rate exemptions, combining paid and voluntary work and accessing various grants and financial supports. Importantly this allowed the project to raise funds quickly for immediate as well as for longer-term use.



**“**Global Goals Centre was able to bring in £33k in sponsorship in a short space of time to create the design work on the ground floor. This was still an incredibly tiny budget for the space we had to fill and, again, huge gratitude to Invisible Circus creatives for their incredible commitment to the set build. There was so much goodwill because everyone was inspired by the vision and excited by the high-profile project and so were willing to work at a lower rate, though still at the Living Wage, which we insisted on. We also secured a £100k National Lottery Grant which paid for the Project Director and Creative Director's time, a Marketing Officer and Volunteer Co-ordinator up until December 2023.”

Jenny, GGC

**“**While funding such as the Vacant Property Grant and Arts Council England funding were a great boost enabling us to buy security equipment and pay for art installations, performers and a producer to manage the activity, operational costs were not funded. The ground floor build wouldn't have been possible without the sponsorship Global Goal Centre brought in. Our bullish projections of reaching profitability by December 2023 were pushed back (we are now hoping to repay Artspace's investment by September 2024). We opened the ground floor to the public on May 13, 2023, on a lease which ran until December 2024 and the artists' studios and events space one month later.”

Kat, ASLS



### 4.3.1 Key elements of the financial model

The project benefits from a range of funding sources including sponsors, pro bono contributions, grants and loans. This diversity in funding not only supports the project's sustainability but also enables a wide scope of activities and improvements. The project has also attracted sponsorship

from businesses aligned with its ethical vision and has secured specific grants aimed at revitalising vacant commercial properties. For example, it received a £50,000 bounce-back loan from Arts Council England and a £7,500 from Vacant Commercial Property Grant, among other financial support. Sparks's unique vision was recognised by funders such as the National Lottery:

“We have around £28 million to distribute each year [...] and in Bristol on average we award around just over £2.5 - £3 million - so not a huge amount when you think about the volume of applicants we see, so it is actually quite a competitive process. [...] Environmental sustainability is not actually on our very local priorities, it's not like number one at all, but it's on our list of priorities and it's an area that we didn't and don't still have a huge amount of investment in [...] so this [Sparks project] was the one that stood out.

*This [application] was a difficult one because of the piloting nature of it; normally we like to fund things that have some sense of, you know, going to be around for a while. But there's a legacy and actually [...] every potential this would be around for longer or it would learn from this and be able to move that somewhere else, or actually the learning from this could spark other cities and towns to be doing something really simple. So, it [the application] was rich in learning and that's why I kept pushing - it was that it would be really valuable for us to be part of this journey.”*

Funders from National Lottery



Various forms of pro bono support, including consultancy and research grants from universities, play a significant role in bolstering the project's resources. Moreover, they were able to use the High Street Economic Recovery Fund which offers three-months of relief from business rates for empty properties, easing the financial burden on the project and encouraging the repurposing of vacant spaces.

The project benefits from landlords interested in supporting businesses with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes, contributing to a collaborative effort in reviving the high street. It is worth highlighting that temporary occupation of specific building typologies, such as department stores, relies heavily on their ownership. In this department store the lease holder was also the landlord and tenant (M&S) - so decisions on temporary occupation is straightforward and no further negotiations were involved.

The project also emphasises the importance of balancing costs with the activation of space. Much of the funding was allocated before the

project's operational phase, covering essential repairs, communication tools, event planning and setting up the business infrastructure. This upfront investment allowed for the rapid development of the project's infrastructure, including necessary building repairs and public engagement strategies. Furthermore, the financial model includes planning for the project's conclusion, considering the types of leases and adaptations that can maximise benefits while minimising costs. This includes strategies such as exemptions from business rates, government relief schemes and negotiations with property owners to cover utilities and allow for limited spatial adaptations. These adaptations afford for activities such as: offering venues for hire at affordable rates - which is unusual for city centre locations - and planning for mixed-use spaces that combine profit-making activities with social spaces. This innovative financial model not only supports the project's viability but also aligns with its vision of transforming the high street into a vibrant hub for education, art, and culture.

“We were very grateful for small grants from Bristol City Council and John James Bristol Foundation as well as pro bono support from local companies such as Burges Salmon, Alec French Architects and Hydrock for their help in these early stages before any other funding came in. As we had such a short time to open to make it worth running as a pilot project (as our lease originally had a break clause in December 2023) we had to work so fast and just get to our publicised opening date in a far from completed state! We have continued to improve ever since and are very much a work in progress even now.”

Jenny, GGC



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“Sparks is 108,000 square feet and had been empty since January 2022. Like most of our projects we take on a meanwhile basis, it was a leap of faith for Artspace Lifespace. We didn't have a grant to start the project but we had built up our reserves during Covid and had a £50k bounce back loan we had not used during Covid. We were just deciding whether we should return or keep this loan when the opportunity to take on this building came along. People often express surprise at how quickly we opened. Had we had more time and money to 'get it right' we would have, but meanwhile spaces don't have the luxury of time. And Artspace Lifespace didn't have the luxury of being funded in advance. That meant it was essential we opened as quickly as possible to start generating income as quickly as possible as we needed to repay a loan not take risks funded by a grant.”

Kat, ASLS

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#### 4.4 LOCATION, SPATIAL QUALITIES AND ADAPTATION

The Sparks vision involves rejuvenating the high street and fostering an equitable future - it strategically occupies a central city location. It utilises its prime positioning to improve accessibility, attract a diverse user base and benefit from high pedestrian traffic. Located in the pedestrian friendly Broadmead shopping area, the project enjoys increased visitor numbers, thanks to easy access and a welcoming environment for pedestrians. At the heart of the project is creative spatial adaptation, intended to instil a sense of belonging, balance the use of space for public and private purposes across different levels and provide affordable cultural venues for artists affected by Bristol's high rental costs. This initiative transforms shopfronts into interactive educational platforms

and dedicates spaces to cultural and creative endeavours. On Broadmead, Sparks's shopfronts signal a shift in shopping habits and introduce innovative department stores such as Travel, Energy or Imagination, which promote sustainable living choices to the public. Thus, a bustling high street location is leveraged to preview the future of retail.

A similar strategy is applied to the shopfronts on Horsefair street. However, with fewer active retail fronts on Horsefair, the presence of a vacant Debenhams building for over three years, alongside Primark, one of the UK's largest fast fashion retailers, Sparks uses its Horsefair entrance primarily to guide the public through the building to Broadmead. This corridor, historically an alley and later a passageway through the M&S Food Hall and department store, is reactivated to facilitate public movement within the building. The

building's adaptation harnesses this internal foot traffic to arrange new department stores and engage the public with art that contributes to sustainability and climate narratives.

Selecting this location is in line with broader city planning and regeneration strategies, which aim to inject socio-economic value into the area by transforming it from a conventional retail hub into a dynamic, multi-use environment celebrating education, art and culture. The project's community-focused, unconventional use of the building enhances Broadmead and the city centre's offerings to the public and Bristol's diverse residents. Creating a space tailored to varied users, such as a Feminist bookshop or a Repair Cafe, fosters a welcoming atmosphere offering informative, interactive, creative, social and personalised experiences without the sole focus on shopping -something not found when online shopping. Sparks's success is attributed to its contribution to the locale and meeting the diverse needs of city centre visitors. It presents an alternative to traditional shopping streets by inviting visitors to explore



©Jon Craig

new ideas, fostering optimism about the future and discovering community-driven, grassroots initiatives. The spatial adaptations align with this goal, allowing visitors to traverse the space, relax, enjoy a coffee, or interact with artistic installations and local shops without the pressure to purchase.

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“We know that some people just want to use Sparks as a cut-through so we maintained a wide boulevard with lots of interesting art educating on sustainability, travel, water-saving measures and the SDGs. Our ambition is that people passing through find something that Sparks their interest, whether that be art, energy-saving tidbits or small sustainable changes that they can implement that can make a difference.”

Kat, ASLS

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This strategy addresses the national retail crisis on high streets and the shift towards online shopping, aiming to repurpose architecturally significant buildings, thereby injecting new life into spaces rich with history. Revitalising such a central area presents challenges. Unlike neighbourhood projects with established local communities, city-centre initiatives must endeavour to attract and engage a diverse community from the outset. This requires creating a space appealing to a broad spectrum of visitors, from local residents to tourists, encouraging them to perceive the high street as more than a shopping destination but as a hub of learning, creativity and sustainable living.

It is crucial to note that the departure of a nationally recognised establishment such as M&S can leave a significant void on the high street. Overcoming the negative impact of closing a high street store presents a challenge for local authorities. Sparks

addresses this by innovatively using space, from creating inviting urban streets within the premises to offering affordable venues for hire, blending commercial spaces with social ones. This approach tackles economic regeneration aspects and the social and cultural dimensions, ensuring the high street's relevance and vibrancy amid evolving consumer behaviours and economic pressures.

As the government seeks to 'bring life back into empty high streets' the adaptation of buildings - like this M&S - considering their size, form and age, faces numerous constraints. Some buildings may not be suitable for reuse due to conditions such as asbestos levels or the risk of accelerated deterioration from prolonged vacancy. This places several buildings and heritage assets at risk. Revitalising such buildings to become vibrant places requires careful management of unexpected challenges and costs, alongside flexible and creative governance to adapt rigid physical spaces. In Sparks's case, ASLS's prior experience of managing vacant properties and the landlord's commitment to covering all building-related bills, facilitated the building's adaptation and maintenance. Given the temporary nature of meanwhile use and lease uncertainty, spatial adaptation can be challenging, often requiring temporary solutions. For example, the absence of ground floor toilets in Sparks posed a significant issue, which might have been addressed had there been certainty regarding the lease extension from the outset.

## 4.5. PLANNING FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

Under austerity, and the precarious conditions that creatives, artists and independent businesses face, temporary adaptation of vacant buildings to community places, artists' studios and workspaces has been growing. To reduce the amount of labour and finances of spatial adaptation and maintaining the buildings, it is crucial that the property owners find the right match for such temporary occupation, but also being aware of the vulnerabilities that temporality and uncertainty might create for artists and creatives. Just because old buildings such as department stores are difficult to maintain and are architecturally not easy to turn into housing, they can be the place for artists.

Meanwhile use leases have been encouraged by governments for more than 15 years ([Meanwhile use leases and guidance for landlords www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)), as a non-commercial quick and low-cost occupation of space to activate places. Research shows

that some of these non-commercial activities, including arts and cultural production, would not necessarily benefit from high street visibility and public facing spaces yet they do benefit from being central and interlinked to other infrastructure in the city. Thus, the meanwhile project leverages its city-centre location to support a dynamic mix of uses, engaging a diverse user base through strategic planning and regeneration efforts, as well as creative and meaningful spatial adaptation. Sparks faces the challenge of creating a sense of community in a traditionally commercial area with retail-dominant use and high footfall but addresses this through careful planning and a focus on inclusivity, diversity and socio-economic values, all while honouring the histories and memories of landmark buildings such as M&S, which has been at the heart of the city centre and people's memories for more than 70 years. Bristol has been a leading city when it comes to its artistic and cultural scene, but as Bristol City Council Art and Culture officer states:

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“It took us a long time to negotiate the necessity of art and culture in future developments, it was a laid-back city when it comes to integrating art and culture into planning practice and regeneration programmes.”

**Bristol City Council Art and Culture Officer**

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Today, Bristol prides itself on new strategies to support public art and creativity accessible to communities. What Sparks shows in terms of cultural spaces is that cultural integration is not separate from community spaces and people. Cultural spaces such as Sparks contribute to communities' well-being, creativity and participation. They require affordable and accessible space, but also vision, creative financing and supportive and experienced governance, to be able to support community.

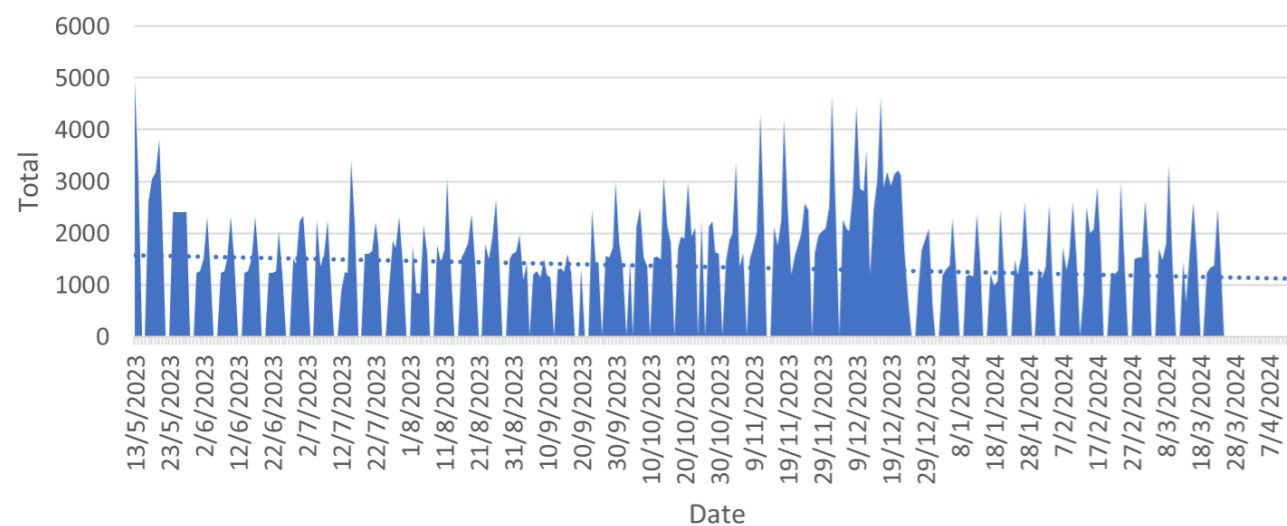
#### 4.6 KEY IMPACTS

This section details key data collected by the team at Sparks. They yield significant insight into its everyday operation and management.

#### 4.6.1 Visitor numbers

From May 13th, 2023 to March 18th, 2024, there were a total of 455,509 visitors. The visitor numbers fluctuate significantly, with some days having very high visitor numbers (e.g. over 4,000) and others much lower (below 1,000). This reflects varying demand on different days or possibly special events or promotions that attract more customers. The run up to Christmas was especially busy, which interestingly shows how the decision to mix production and consumption activities, with retail on the ground floor, was a particularly astute one. It also capitalises on how the building affords visitors a through way between Horsefair and Broadmead.

Figure 1: Visitor numbers May 2023 to March 2024



#### 4.6.2 Visitor engagement

A total of 79 comments were analysed from social media as well as conversations within Sparks. The comments provided reveal several

prominent themes related to the transformation of the old M&S space by The Invisible Circus and its impact on the community. Analysing these comments, we can distil the main themes as follows:

A significant theme revolves around the positive impact on the community and the promotion of social causes. The space's transformation is praised for its focus on children, recycling and technology education, providing a refuge and a learning environment

that is inclusive and beneficial for individuals with autism and sensory processing difficulties. The mention of volunteering and the communal vibe underscores a strong sense of community engagement and collective benefit.

“The old M&S in Broadmead has been transformed by The Invisible Circus into something rather special. Each area has its own department, and there's a strong message of reuse and recycle throughout. It's very Bristol. Personally thought it was a great use of an empty building. It looks fab.”

Caz on Instagram

“We are so lucky they are bringing something like this to Bristol. I've never seen anything like this in the UK.”

Anthony



©Jon Craig



The emphasis on reuse, recycle and sustainability resonates throughout the comments. Visitors appreciate the strong message of environmental consciousness, with specific mentions of vegan options, recycling and the

encouragement to think about energy use and appliance understanding. This reflects a broader theme of environmental stewardship and the promotion of sustainable living practices.

“This is great news and I’m very pleased for all the traders. The project represents a very innovative, social and ecological way to fill empty high street units no longer viable for large retailers like M&S. And the traders are local. The high street and shopping is changing rapidly and these type of ideas are needed. I always pop in when I’m in Broadmead and encourage others to support it. I’d rather spend my money in the cafe in Sparks rather than super chains like Starbucks and their gift offering is fantastic. I wish them all luck.”

Sian on Facebook

The uniqueness of the project is a recurring theme, with many commenters noting the novelty and distinctiveness of using the space in such an innovative way. The contrast with the previous commercial use by M&S is noted, with the current setup being celebrated for its creativity, educational opportunities and the variety of experiences offered, from food choices to interactive displays.

Comments highlight the accessibility and inclusiveness of the space, mentioning how it caters to various needs, including those with disabilities, sensory issues and dietary preferences. The space is described as calming, comforting and a welcome change from the bustling city centre, suggesting it serves as a sanctuary for diverse groups of people.



©Jack Moyses

“My son is autistic and it’s great to have a space where we can stop, a kind of refuge.”

Unnamed visitor

The emotional and sensory impact of the space is widely praised. Visitors express feelings of calmness, amazement and inspiration. The aesthetic appeal, including the decor and the sensory-friendly design,

“My autistic partner loved the miniatures!”

Unnamed visitor

contributes to a positive experience. The availability of quiet, calming spaces and the emphasis on sensory experiences (e.g. the smell of wood, visual displays) are particularly appreciated.

“I’m Mila and I have sensory processing difficulties and I need this at my school and at home. I really like this.” Mila

The transformation of the building is seen as a revitalisation of the city centre, offering a new purpose for a previously empty building and contributing to the local economy. It is seen as a boost for Bristol, offering a unique shopping and educational experience that draws people into the city centre and supports local traders and artisans.

Personal stories and testimonials add a powerful dimension to the themes, with individuals sharing how the space has touched their lives or those of their family members. These stories range from finding specific products to the joy of participating in the activities offered, highlighting the personal impact beyond the collective experience.

Overall, the transformation of the old M&S space in Bristol into a

vibrant, community-focused and environmentally conscious venue has garnered overwhelmingly positive feedback. It reflects a broader desire for spaces that foster community engagement, environmental sustainability and inclusive experiences, while also serving as a model for innovative use of urban spaces.

#### 4.6.3 Educational impact

Numerous organisations expressed an interest in running workshops at Sparks. Those that were held included Aardman Animations, Sustainable Hive and Global Goals Centre. The total number of attendees was 2,442, with August 2023 and the run up to Christmas being the most attended. These workshops also included schools highlighting the importance of the educational work that both GGC and ASLS do.



Table 1. Workshops held from May 2023 - March 2024 including attendance numbers.

Workshops	May 23	Jun 23	Jul 23	Aug 23	Sep 23	Oct 23	Nov 23	Dec 23	Jan 24	Feb 24	Mar 24
GGC schools workshops	25	55	15		175	14	63	80	94	60	27
GGC craft workshops x 4				65							
Aardman workshops				400							
Re-Fuse schools workshops								1,162			
Re-Fuse summer workshops				98							
Bristol Zoo craft workshop				28							
Rethrindle workshop							6	13	1	23	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>1,243</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>65</b>	
Running total											2,442

Sparks offers tours and talks to stakeholders and those interested in the project. The feedback comments from those who attended these events reflect a variety of themes related to Sparks, highlighting both the successes and areas for improvement in meanwhile use. Overall, these themes encapsulate Sparks's innovative approach to creating interactive and

engaging spaces - the importance of design and customer experience, the potential for community and business development, the need for comfort and accessibility, the power of personal touch and collaboration, the commitment to ethical and social impact and the challenges and inspirations that come with managing such ventures.



The themes from the feedback are summarised and discussed below:

- Sparks's ability to offer eclectic, interesting and interactive elements showcases a commitment to innovation and creativity. This creative approach not only enhances the visitor experience but also supports sustainability and recycling efforts.
- Understanding and incorporating customer movement within the space demonstrates a thoughtful approach to design and customer experience. By accepting and integrating natural customer pathways into the design, Sparks enhances usability and accessibility, making the space more welcoming and effective for its intended purposes.
- The mention of event spaces and co-working areas highlights the potential of these spaces to serve as hubs for community engagement and business incubation. The emphasis on balancing affordability with financial viability reflects an awareness of the need to sustain these spaces while making them accessible to a broad audience.
- The concern about the cold temperature suggests that physical comfort within the space is an area needing attention. Solutions for heating are necessary to ensure the space remains comfortable and inviting for both occupiers and customers, highlighting the importance of basic amenities in the overall experience.
- The mention of 'Sparklers' and the value placed on personal interaction and greeting emphasises the importance of community engagement and the personal touch in creating a welcoming environment. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and connection among visitors and participants.
- The success of Sparks is attributed to strong partnerships and collaboration, particularly between arts and educational charities. This theme underscores the value of working together with a unified vision and theme to achieve common goals, highlighting collaboration as a key factor in the project's impact and success.
- The venture is recognised for its potential to address various social issues and support business incubation through ethical means. This reflects a broader theme of social responsibility and the desire to create positive change through innovative and ethical practices.
- The inspirational story of how Sparks was established, especially the collaboration between different charities and the achievements made with limited resources, showcases the theme of inspiration and resourcefulness. This serves as a motivation for others to take action and collaborate to make a difference.



Table 2. List of tours and talks

Demolish, re-purpose, re-let? What's your place doing with its vacant shopping centre and department store spaces?
MIO Culture & Creative Industries Leads Group
Sparks and UNESCO Creative Cities Evaluation Case Study stakeholder session
Weston Placemaking - North Somerset Council
High Street Co-ordinator - Regeneration Team for South Gloucestershire Council
Island Artist Studio Holders
Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) Tour
Sparking Change - Public Tours & Talks
Sunderland BID - Empty Units Discussion

#### 4.6.4 Environmental and social impact

The Sparks project, guided by the ethos of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrates a strong commitment to creating and sustaining environmental

and social impact. Despite its relatively recent establishment in the building since May 2023, Sparks has already made significant strides in this direction through its selection of engagement activities, partnerships and retailers.



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#### ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT:

“It was essential to us that Sparks ‘walk the walk’ in terms of sustainability. We had the ambitious aim of creating the whole space from recycled or donated materials and, with the help of the brilliant team at Invisible Circus, we did it! Their contacts in the film and theatre worlds enabled us to get some fabulous ‘hand-me-downs’ including the Crystal Maze doors and the balcony pillars from Young Victoria! These were all saved from the skip, and inspired these studios to think more widely about how they recycle set materials. We also received a lot of chairs and tables from CollectEco who save furniture from office and shop clearances.”

Jenny, GGC

A notable achievement of the Sparks project is its substantial contribution to reducing waste and promoting sustainability. The project has successfully diverted a total of 11,607kg of items from landfill, encompassing a variety of materials and products. This includes 8,564kg of fashion-related

items, 2,548kg through Emmaus, and other significant contributions from its Repair Cafe and ReUse department. Such efforts not only help in mitigating landfill waste but also encourage a culture of repair, reuse and sustainable consumption among the community and traders involved.



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“Just one store can’t solve the climate crisis but we can show people what stores focused on sustainability and communities, rather than dividends and shareholder profits, look like. By making trading at Sparks affordable, we are providing an incubator space for new high-street sustainable traders in a location with high footfall. Sparks offers traders starting up a unique opportunity to transition from an occasional pop-up to develop their high street proposition in a supportive environment with traders paying much less for a month of trading than if they were paying market rates. Some of the stores that started the journey with us have stayed and expanded to take on some more space, some sadly lost their funding and others just did not work out as viable businesses.”

Kat, ASLS

The directors were also careful with respect to curating the ground floor with traders to ensure that they were aligned to the UN SDGs.

“We carefully select the traders, exhibitors and events that take place at Sparks. All new prospective traders need to apply to be part of Sparks and are scored by Global Goals Centre for their fit and against the SDGs. Questions we ask potential new traders include asking them how their business contributes to social and/or climate justice, their approach to packaging, waste, sourcing etc. We ask fashion retailers what kind of fabrics they are selling and how the trader will support these aims to promote action on the Sustainable Development Goals? We also recently added a question asking potential traders whether they are part of the global majority? (this is a collective term for non-white people who constitute approximately 85% of the global population) as we are keen for the traders as well as the visitors to be reflective of who comes into Broadmead.”

Kat, ASLS

Importantly Sparks is helping to achieve Bristol’s commitment to net zero by 2030 . This citywide policy is referenced in terms of reuse and

behaviour change to reduce waste and energy consumption across the departments, especially Fashion, Energy, Food, Travel, ReUse.



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## CASE STUDY: ANNE SU, CHINESE COMMUNITY CHAMPION

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“My name is Anne Su. I’m the founder of One Green Kitchen CIC which is a new established community interest company and our vision is having green meals to change the world’s future. And also One Green Kitchen is a member of Bristol City Council’s Champion Network. At Sparks we got the Champion Corner and you will see different languages as part of that and we support marginalised groups to share their thoughts and become involved in this sustainability discussion.

Sparks is a creative, accessible and friendly hub to embrace the local community to be involved and showcase their customs and production. We are very pleased to be involved in a series of events; the events have a great impact on the Chinese community. For example Jenny invited young Chinese musicians to play some music at the opening. They were very young - between 10 and 13. It was the first time they were able to play Chinese traditional instruments called Erhu and they were very pleased to be involved. Also in Sparks you will see some lanterns which were co-designed by the Chinese elderly and you see some handwritten stories of how Chinese people celebrate the Lantern Festival.

Thank you for Sparks again for the opportunity for different communities to showcase their products, for example Chinese food or maybe Chinese customs, different festivals. We also encouraged new Hong Kong migrants - the young artists - to showcase their products as well.

Finally we set up an art club for the Chinese elderly to allow lonely, elderly people to meet to do some artwork, and also I’m going to showcase these at Sparks as well.”

Anne Su, Chinese Community Champion

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## CASE STUDY: ISABEL BURT, FIRST BUS

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“I’m Isabel from First Bus West of England and I work in the Marketing team. Jenny approached us early this year to get involved with Sparks and we knew straight away it was going to be a great fit.

Climate action goes hand-in-hand with bus travel because - fun fact - a double decker bus can take 75 cars off the road. When we think about that in terms of clean air and, with the Clean Air Zone being introduced to Bristol, it’s going to have a huge impact if you just change one journey to bus travel per week. The position of Sparks is also really important to us as well. This is a very iconic and well-known building and the footfall is very high - 9,000 people a week - which is really amazing. It’s created a very engaging and exciting area for us to engage with members of the public who might not have considered travelling by bus, or who might have some barrier, and it allows us to connect with them and show that actually bus travel is easy and it’s affordable. We’re really excited to see and think about what we could do for the next phase of Sparks!

On the social front, Sparks has facilitated a substantial amount of volunteer engagement across its various departments, totalling 2,701 hours. This engagement spans across key areas such as Re-use, Repair Cafe, Fashion, Energy and more, reflecting a broad-based community involvement in the project’s operations. The project supports 167 partner organisations, including 13 charities and Community Interest Companies (CICs), 141 traders, and 12 community groups, in departments ranging from Food and Fashion to Nature and Wellbeing. This wide array of partnerships not only enhances the project’s inclusivity and reach but also amplifies its impact on both the local economy and community cohesion.

Through departments such as Food, Fashion, Gifts, Re-Use, Nature and Community Champions, Sparks has established a diverse ecosystem championing sustainable living practices, supporting local economies and fostering community engagement. The inclusion of 14 groups as Community Champions further underscores the project’s dedication to community-driven initiatives, highlighting its role as a catalyst for social cohesion and community empowerment.

In summary, the Sparks project stands out as a model for sustainable urban development, achieving notable environmental and social impacts through its innovative approach to waste reduction, volunteer engagement and community partnerships. By aligning its operations with the UN SDGs, Sparks exemplifies how projects can contribute meaningfully to the environmental and social wellbeing of their communities, even within a short span of their establishment.”

Isabel Burt, First Bus

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## CASE STUDY: JULZ DAVIES, CURIOSITY UNLIMITED

“I’m the Disruptor in Chief of Curiosity Unlimited. We’re a think-and-do tank taking proactive positive action for inequality and social justice. We’re very much focused on making Bristol the best city for people of colour to live in by 2030. That’s because it’s currently the seventh worst but I want to say thank you to all of the Sparks team - it’s been a great place for me to do some incredible work.

The Big Bristol Bus Boycott Takeover happened in Sparks 60 days before the 60th anniversary. I called together 60 change-makers to come up with 60 ways to celebrate the 60th anniversary of what is probably the biggest and most important racial diversity moment that’s happened in this country and that came out of this city in 1963. It is something that actually led to the Race Relations Act and today is at the heart of the Equalities Act 2010 and Bristol Bus Boycott defeated the Colour Bar on the day that Martin Luther King had a dream, so we begin to start to see how important this particular moment is for the city. Those 60 changemakers between us came up not with 60 - it actually now stands at 77 - ways to mark the Bristol Bus Boycott.

What I loved about Sparks is it was pushing an open door. They said “Yeah we’ll host this event” and now the display is proudly stood in Sparks Travel Agency, bringing new generations of Bristolians to an understanding of our history.”

Julz Davies, Curiosity Unlimited

Table 3. Partner organisations in Sparks

Department	Organisations involved	Total	Charities / CICs	Traders	Community Groups
Food	6 traders, BFN	7	1	6	
Fashion	9 traders, 2 pop-ups, 2 charities	13	2	9	
Gifts	1 org, 120 traders	121		121	
Re-Use	1 charity, 1 comm gp, 3 traders	5	2	3	1
Nature	8 charities	8	8		
Wellbeing	2 traders	2		2	
Community Champions	14 community groups	11			11
Total		167	13	141	12

Table 4. Volunteering at different Sparks departments

Department	Hours
Re-use	679
Repair cafe	578.5
Fashion	398.25
Energy	308.5
Events / welcomers	87.5
Lunchtime talks and films	102
Marketing / funding support	41
Re-fuse workshops	
Nature	36.5
GGC workshops	
Other	374
Total	2700.75
Days (6.5 working hours/ day)	416

Table 5. Items saved from landfill in Sparks

Area	No. of items
Fashion	8,564
Emmaus	2,548
Weights in kg	6,976.42 kg
Repair Cafe (Fixed)	165
Toaster donations	250
Clothing repaired (Meret)	80
Re-use	
Total items	11,607

### Cost of living crisis

A total of 1,130 people received energy advice on how to reduce bills, affordable payment options, as well as switching to renewables. The Repair Cafe has repaired 187 items (to end March) saving people money on needing to pay for repairs or buy new, as well as saving items from landfill. Sparks’s affordable rent policy and support for ethical trading has lifted several small ethical traders out of



poverty, meaning they have been able to improve their standard of living by getting better housing or taking their first holiday in many years.

### 4.6.5 Impact on Bristol’s arts sector

The initiative highlighted in the provided data demonstrates a substantial impact on Bristol’s arts sector through the provision of spaces for artists and collectives in a central



urban location. This project offers a variety of spaces within a studio environment, accommodating a diverse range of artists, creatives and organisations. With spaces allocated to a variety of entities, including five charity organisations such as Bristol Nature and Climate Partnership, as well as GGC and ASLS, the studio acts as a hub for both environmental and artistic activism. A private studio for individual artists such as Ant Lightfoot allows for personal creative pursuits, while co-working spaces like Tabb.cc foster collaboration and networking among creatives.

The provision of desk space for charity organisations such as Fareshare SW indicates a commitment to social causes alongside artistic endeavours. The presence of 40 collective members within the large staff area operated by Tabb.cc and the hosting of artist collectives such as Bristol Refugee Artists Collective and Diverse Arts Network suggest a significant focus on collective and community-oriented art projects.

Residency spaces and studios, like those of Emma Geen, Lucille Leith, and the prisoners' artist collective Prodigal Arts led by Elliot Ellison Holder, show an investment in long-term artistic development. The initiative facilitates exposure and potentially career advancement for artists by providing a consistent and supportive environment to create and showcase their work. The shared use of spaces, such as the Invisible Circus Studio and the Studio - The

Safe Room by collectives, emphasises resource sharing and sustainability within the arts community. This collective use of space can lead to a reduction in overhead costs and promote a sustainable model of operation for artists and arts organisations.

With spaces such as the Natasha Smith Studio and the Reactive Arts Studio by Louie Norwood, the project accommodates a range of art forms and practices, including those that might be under-represented in mainstream venues. The inclusion of warehouse storage for artists like Charlotte Riddett reflects an understanding of the varied spatial needs of artists, including storage for large artworks or materials. The currently vacant spaces, such as the 60s Meeting Room and the Office (We Did It), indicate opportunities for expansion and inclusivity of more artists and collectives, suggesting an ongoing evolution and dynamism of the project.

In summary, such an initiative has the potential to significantly impact the arts sector by providing a variety of spaces that cater to individual artists, charities and creative collectives. This initiative not only supports the creation and exhibition of art but also nurtures a community of artists and creatives, promoting collaboration, social engagement and cultural development. It underscores the importance of accessible and versatile spaces in fostering a vibrant and sustainable arts ecosystem.

Table 6. Studio data

Studio	Number in Studio	Artist/ Collective
IF Desk Space	5	Charity Org
IF Desk Space	5	Charity Org
Private Artists Studio behind the events space	1	Artist
Ladies Lockers Room (Purple)	0	Co-working
Stock Room (Green)	1	Artist
Large Staff Area (White)	40	Collective
Desk space	12	Charity Org
Desk space	2	Other Creative
Residency Desk Space (allocated 10 desks until Dec 2023)	5	Collective
Desk space	1	Collective
Residency Desk Space	1	Collective
Desk space	1	Artist
Desk space	1	Artist
Desk space	1	Artist
Desk space	1	Other Creative
Residency Desk Space	1	Artist
Residency Desk Space	1	Artist
Studio (skylight)	1	Artist
Studio (The Super Secret Office)	1	Artist
60s Meeting Room	1	Artist
Studio (Corner)	6	Collective
Studio	1	Artist
Natasha Smith	1	Artist
Studio	1	Artist
Warehouse Storage	1	Artist
Invisible Circus Studio	5	Collective
Studio - The Safe Room	5	Collective
Formerly The Blue Room	1	Artist
Office (We Did It)	8	Collective





## CASE STUDY: SAYAMBRITA, BRISTOL REFUGEE ARTS COLLECTIVE

“My name is Sayambrita, I am an artist and I’m a member of Bristol Refugee Artists Collective (BRAC). BRAC is essentially a group of artists who have come together from different places, cultures, languages, experiences and we’ve come together in order to be able to express ourselves through our art and tell our stories.

We have been very fortunate thanks to Sparks to have space here, because BRAC doesn’t have an office, in fact our website is not absolutely professional yet. BRAC has put on a couple of exhibitions but we are still organising ourselves so it’s a boon to have a space here.

Having this space feels like another home and I say that on behalf of all my fellow artists from BRAC -it has given us opportunities to work towards exhibitions and planning and look ahead - otherwise we weren’t sure where we were heading. It feels like there’s consistent support and I can tell you it makes a world of a difference to everyone in BRAC so thank you so much to the wonderful Sparks team.”

Sayambrita, Bristol Refugee Arts Collective



### 4.6.6 Sparklers feedback

Sparklers were an important part of Sparks - they were artists paid at Arts Council rates, but funding ended at the end of March 2024. Their primary task was to engage with the public on the ground floor, answer questions about the project and assist traders if needed. As part of their remit, they recorded information that could be used to recognise achievements, improve Sparks, improve their role and contribute to further funding bids. This section highlights themes that emerged through their feedback notes. The project successfully engaged customers through a variety of interactive, educational and entertaining activities, particularly those involving circus skills, personal interactions and creative tasks. Expansion and improvement could focus on broadening the range of activities, enhancing educational

components and improving infrastructure to support varied interactions, ensuring comfort and clear communication.

Circus tricks, particularly juggling and clowning, drew significant attention and engagement from the public. These activities, including diabolo, glow poi and unicycle riding, were especially effective in capturing the interest of families and children. Performances that involved the audience, such as failing at juggling and inviting people to participate, enhanced the experience by making it interactive and relatable.

Creative activities such as the Parks of Bristol and 9 Trees section - where people engaged with more tranquil and reflective activities such as colouring - were also well-received. This indicates a desire for a mix of



energetic and calm reflective spaces within the project.

Engaging conversations about the mission and values of Sparks, direct interactions inviting people inside and explaining what the store offers were effective in drawing people's attention and curiosity. Personal touches such as the lightbulb hat and thematic costumes (e.g. fabulous frocks) added to the engagement by sparking conversations.

Explaining the purpose and offerings of Sparks and inviting people to learn new skills (e.g. juggling tricks) or to participate in workshops (e.g. Christmas Top Making Workshop, storytime) were highly engaging. These elements combined education with entertainment, aligning with people's interest in learning in an enjoyable environment.

Live performances, whether from bands or individual musicians playing instruments like the piano, significantly boosted engagement. These activities transformed the space into a vibrant hotspot, attracting crowds and encouraging people to enter the store.

### Areas for expansion and improvement

Expanding on quiet, reflective activities including colouring or mindfulness workshops could cater to a wider audience, including older individuals or those seeking a peaceful retreat from the bustling environment.

Building on the educational aspects, such as workshops on environmentalism or storytelling, could further enrich the customer experience. Providing

more opportunities for learning and engagement around Sparks's mission and values could deepen the connection with the community.

Setting up more interactive stations (e.g. 'Have-a-go! Learn a juggling trick!' with laid-out circus equipment) on a regular basis could maintain high levels of engagement, especially on weekends when families are more likely to visit.

Considering feedback on activities and their locations within the space, there's potential to better utilise areas for specific types of engagement, like setting up more tables for board games or creative activities, which encourages organic engagement.

Ensuring the space is comfortable regardless of the weather could improve the overall experience and encourage longer stays. This isn't directly mentioned but could be inferred as important for maintaining engagement during less favourable conditions.

To address confusion (e.g. around how certain installations work), improving signage and communication about the activities and their purpose could enhance the visitor experience.

### 4.6.7 Sparks and beyond

The presence of Sparks has influenced the sustainable behaviour of retailers shopping in Sparks (see Appendix A and B). However, has it also influenced the behaviour of other businesses in and around Broadmead? What kinds of changes and impacts can be attributed to Sparks's long-term influence and which changes are

merely reactive and not quick, one-off responses such as greenwashing?

Future studies are needed to explore these impacts over a longer period and across a wider geography. For instance, does the introduction of repair workshops and a vintage section in Primark, (a fast fashion retailer located just across from Sparks) align with Sparks's vision of sustainable retail and a circular economy, or are these sustainable practices examples of corporate greenwashing? Additionally, is this change unique to Bristol, or is it occurring in other Primark locations?

Has the presence of Sparks influenced key stakeholders' decisions or perspectives in future projects? For example, have there been changes

in perceptions of Broadmead, such as encouraging sustainability and sustainable shopping, and fostering community building? Have there been any changes in the types of uses and retailers in Cabot Circus?

Furthermore, has the innovative use of the Sparks building influenced property agents' and owners' perceptions of meanwhile use? Would they be more open to similar initiatives due to the success of Sparks.

As we write this report developers are eyeing the city centre, proposing to replace buildings like Sparks with student housing. Has Sparks influenced the Regeneration team's or Bristol City Council's views on what they would like to see replace Sparks in the long term.







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## 5.0 CONCLUSION

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In the face of austerity, budget constraints and the cost-of-living crisis, 'meanwhile use' has emerged as an innovative response to the challenges facing high streets, offering a new lease of life to cultural production and consumption spaces. This adaptive use of temporary spaces provides multifaceted benefits, supporting high streets and invigorating the cultural and creative sectors. Yet, it also brings to light the complexities of high street regeneration, where meanwhile use can both contribute positively and accentuate challenges.

The case of Sparks Bristol exemplifies the potential and intricacies of meanwhile use. It showcases sustainable, creative and circular economy practices amid changing priorities and fiscal cutbacks. This report strives to understand the objectives and necessities of Sparks stakeholders, highlight the experiences of those managing such spaces and develop an evaluation framework to track progress and success.

As the traditional retail-dominated high street model declines, the turn towards 'experience economy' and community-centric initiatives gains momentum. The high street's historic role in fostering social ties and community identity is re-emerging, with a focus on community engagement over retail-centric development. Projects like Sparks Bristol play a

pivotal role in this transition, offering a community-driven model that not only fills vacant shopfronts but also enriches community welfare, particularly in economically uncertain times.

Sparks Bristol, situated in the iconic M&S building, represents a significant policy advancement in the use of meanwhile space. It is a hub for artists, sustainability and education, a reimagination of departmental stores aligning with the UN SDGs. Despite its successful lease extension, the project faces ongoing uncertainties that epitomise the challenges of transient urban policy.

Funded by a blend of loans, grants and sponsorships, Sparks leverages collaborative governance and creative spatial strategies to fulfil its transformative vision. Yet, the project's sustainability depends on the careful balance of operational costs and the need to engage a diverse community. The pressures of city-centre initiatives to build a community from scratch underscore the necessity for inclusive and inviting spaces.

Sparks's approach to meanwhile use emphasises environmental sustainability, reducing waste and fostering volunteer engagement. It has created an ecosystem of partnerships across food, fashion, wellbeing and community sectors, exemplifying the social and economic impact of meanwhile use.





For the arts sector in Bristol, initiatives like Sparks offer vital space and visibility to a broad spectrum of artists and collectives. By providing affordable and versatile spaces, Sparks nurtures a thriving arts community, driving collaboration, social engagement and cultural development - crucial in a vibrant and sustainable arts ecosystem.

Sparks also represents a significant effort to revitalise the high street through innovative urban experiments, shared visions and strategic partnerships. With its creative financing, location, spatial adaptation and planning for art and culture, Sparks demonstrates the potential of temporary spaces to effect positive change in urban environments.

The Sparks project illustrates the benefits and complexities of meanwhile use, offering valuable insights into the possibilities of urban space reimagining. Its impact on Bristol's high streets and arts sector underscores the need for continued support and

comprehensive policy consideration for projects that blend community engagement, cultural production, and environmental sustainability in revitalising urban spaces.

Regarding the evaluation of meanwhile spaces, the Sparks project interim evaluation employs a participatory action research approach, encouraging stakeholder involvement to foster sustainable and relevant outcomes, although this method may require significant time and resources. Interviews provided detailed qualitative insights but carry the risk of bias, and while workshops promote collaborative reflection, they may miss perspectives of those not in attendance. Quantitative data lends measurable evidence to the project's impact but may overlook the qualitative nuances of community and cultural development. The utilisation of existing data from Sparks adds authenticity but could be limited in scope relative to the



evaluation's objectives. Conducting an interim evaluation allows for timely adjustments and ensures alignment with goals; however, it might not capture long-term sustainability.

This multifaceted strategy - building upon previous evaluations - is designed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the project, blending qualitative and quantitative analyses to gauge the Sparks project's broader impacts on urban regeneration and the arts sector. By actively engaging with the process and including direct stakeholder feedback, the evaluation can influence the project's trajectory in real-time. The strategy is adaptive, suitable for the dynamic nature of meanwhile use and supports iterative learning. It is essential, though, to maintain objectivity and inclusivity across a broad stakeholder spectrum, ensuring the findings can inform wider urban regeneration policy and practice.

To effectively harness the potential of meanwhile use spaces for urban regeneration, a nuanced approach to evaluation is essential. This involves

developing flexible frameworks that can adapt to the unique dynamics of temporary spaces and the diverse needs of stakeholders, from policymakers to local communities. Enhancing stakeholder engagement is crucial; by involving all parties in decision-making and maintaining open communication, projects can better serve community and cultural objectives. Meanwhile spaces should be integrated into broader urban planning and sustainability initiatives, ensuring they contribute to long-term economic development and community cohesion. This includes modifying zoning regulations to support temporary uses and encouraging policies that support economic growth through creative use of vacant spaces.

Furthermore, addressing the challenges posed by the temporariness of these spaces is vital. Strategies should be developed to provide stability for users and mitigate the risk of gentrification, possibly by creating pathways to more permanent community spaces. Meanwhile spaces should also focus on inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring they are open and welcoming to diverse populations, including those with disabilities. Supporting art and cultural activities within these projects can boost the local arts scene, providing artists with necessary resources and visibility. By taking a holistic and integrated approach - considering the interplay of social, economic, and environmental factors - meanwhile use projects can enrich the cultural landscape, foster community bonds and promote sustainable urban living.



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# 6.0 SPARK THE REVOLUTION

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## IGNITING CHANGE IN PEOPLE AND CITYSCAPES BY KATHRYN CHISWELL JONES AND JENNY FOSTER

Sparks Bristol was founded by Artspace Lifespace and Global Goals Centre and will be celebrating the first anniversary on May 11th, 2024. Kathryn Chiswell Jones, the Company Manager

at Artspace Lifespace and Jenny Foster, Co-Director of Global Goals Centre, who are co-directors of the Sparks Project talk about some aspects of the process and what happens next.

## THE MAKINGS OF A DEPARTMENT STORE

“Maker space for ‘messy’ creativity is becoming squeezed and we wanted to create an affordable space in what has become an unaffordable part of the city for creatives to make, develop and showcase their work. Because of the iconic nature of this building and the opportunities it presented in terms of footfall, we knew we wanted to have public access on the ground floor but weren’t sure how to best make that happen. A key motivation for taking on Sparks was not just to take on another meanwhile space, but to influence future development in the city that put community and sustainability at its heart.”

Kat, ASLS

“Global Goals Centre wanted to find a space where we could create installations that got people thinking about the climate crisis and social justice issues, but in a positive, playful way. Initially we were thinking we wanted a space like We the Curious - more like an education centre or museum. Global Goals Centre wasn’t particularly interested in managing a building but wanted to create engaging experiences to inspire learning and action on climate and equality in our everyday lives.”

Jenny, GGC



## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

“From first viewing the building in May 2022 and taking on the lease in December 2022, a number of leaks had sprung up in the building, most taps didn't work and there was only one toilet! Lots of issues with emergency lighting meaning we had to bring in temporary lighting solutions. A 1950s building riddled with asbestos meant we couldn't make alterations in the building which meant we had to be creative with solutions for dividing up the large open floorplate.

Working with such a small team with limited resources is challenging but it is certainly never dull. One day I may be reviewing leases, writing contracts, reviewing budgets, creating new risk assessments and security protocols to devising creative content. However the stress of taking a project on like Sparks is immense and looking back on the wider impacts it has had - whilst we would still choose to do it all over again - the toll it took on team members' physical and mental health should not be underestimated. It has taken one year for our team to feel like they can take time to rest.

Meanwhile space is challenging and uncertain and while I'm so proud of us what we have collaboratively achieved, constantly pivoting is exhausting and, as people's livelihoods become increasingly dependent on Sparks, I do worry about 'what is next' and how we can continue to support the individuals who have fed into the collective effort that is Sparks. But the whole ethos of Sparks is to create a space that is positive so we have to remain positive and focused about what we can achieve in the time that we have.

One of the most exciting and challenging aspects of Sparks is using Sparks to challenge Britain's 'Me-Centric' Society, focused on individualism over collectivism. At some point in 2021 I realised the grip 'Doomism' was having on people making changes and deterring engagement in key issues such as sustainability. People were feeling powerless in the face of environmental challenges and by increased restrictions on protest, and this sense of helplessness leads to individuals believing their efforts will have little impact on the larger issues.

Jenny and I were in agreement that a space that focused on the dire consequences of environmental degradation and constant exposure to negative messaging may lead to people disengaging from discussions about sustainability altogether, as well as cognitive dissonance with some individuals engaging in psychological defence mechanisms such as denial or rationalisation. This cognitive dissonance further inhibits meaningful engagement with sustainability efforts. Doomism can undermine collective action by fostering a sense of fatalism and individualism...



We wanted Sparks to be a space of positivity, where people could learn about the changes they could make and start to believe that systemic change is possible and encourage them to prioritise the long-term wellbeing of the planet and future generations over individual short-term gains.”

Kat, ASLS

“Local media have provided us with some challenges too - when we put out an appeal for funding for Global Goals Centre's education and community engagement work, they issued a misleading article saying Sparks was going to close if we didn't get funding! This caused anxiety amongst traders and uncertainty from funders fearing we were likely to close.

We also had a recent scare when the building was threatened with closure due to the leaky roof, but the landlord is now fully on board to help us repair these whilst keeping the ground, first and second floors open. Nevertheless the 3rd floor temporary closure has badly affected creatives using studio spaces there, as well as our income for the whole project.

Being in such a short-term space seriously impacts our ability to gain significant charitable funding for our longevity as a charity, as Sparks is so short-term and many funders prefer to give multi-year funding. It's also sometimes tough proving the impact of Sparks when so many of our visitors don't leave feedback and it's hard to prove or measure the value we bring to the community. However, both ASLS and GGC teams are hugely enthusiastic about the project and we know that this opportunity, whilst short-term and challenging, is having a positive impact on the reputation and influence of both our charities.”

Jenny, GGC



## HOW SPARKS CAN HELP INSPIRE OTHER HIGH STREETS

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“High-street education facilities are inclusive to learners of all ages, promoting lifelong learning and skill development. Our unique model offers hands-on learning via the Repair Cafe and clothes mending workshops, alongside schools workshops and STEM-based workshops. For schools to come into this vibrant environment brings learning alive and helps them envisage a range of green career options, as well as providing a positive example of a circular and fair economy. Modelling this is essential to overcome climate anxiety and enable people to see past the doom and gloom narrative that often pervades the media.”

Jenny, GGC

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“Post-war 20th Century high streets were filled with temples of consumerism and the churches of capitalism. Retail has become the dominant activity in high streets and town centres where in the past civic and community functions would have had a larger role. The high street actually has multiple purposes. While they are commercial centres where businesses can thrive, the social impact of high streets is often not talked about enough. High streets facilitate social interaction and community engagement, providing spaces where people can connect, socialise and participate in shared activities. High streets can also reflect the cultural identity and history of a community, preserving traditions and fostering a sense of place and belonging. It was important to us at Sparks that it be a space that represented the diverse community who frequents Broadmead.

Many of the identikit shops which took over the high streets are moving to out-of-town retail centres you can get to via car. This creates opportunities for independent retailers where people come to browse something different, have an experience and who might come to town with their families by bus or bike. We believe the 21st Century high street should offer:

- Space for community, activity and experiences.
- Services and personal experiences that you can't buy online.
- More independent shopping and manifesting individual identities to adapt to changing lifestyles and values and sell sustainable, high-quality products.”

Kat, ASLS

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## WHAT NEXT FOR OUR SUSTAINABLE HIGH STREETS?

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“It's vital we reverse the move to online shopping with its inherent carbon footprint of packaging, deliveries and returns, as well as supporting local traders and reducing the number of goods that are flown around the world and produced by cheap and exploited labour. Models such as Sparks make it easier for consumers to have a range of local and sustainable shopping options, accessible and affordable. This personal shopping experience is also vital for maintaining communities, and for older people who are more likely to be digitally excluded and value face-to-face interactions in shops and cafes.”

Jenny, GGC

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“While it is great that retail and hospitality can avail of 75% relief on their business rates in the next financial year, discretionary rates relief schemes have been dropped by councils due to financial pressures meaning that many CICs or independent businesses still struggle. One of the obstacles to bringing underused property on the high streets back into use is the high cost of rental property on the high street which is obstructive to independent businesses. The difficulties in finding and obtaining buildings on short-term meanwhile leases are also a challenge to small independents.

The current governmental structure lacks support mechanisms for facilitating collaboration among these groups and has let our cities and towns down badly. Homelessness is on the rise, crime is not tackled by local law enforcement. Consequently, stakeholders have independently fostered relationships and invested significant time and resources to building our own networks. In Bristol, ensuring the vibrancy of local high streets involves various stakeholders, including the City Council's regeneration team, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and local charities and third-sector organisations.

Despite the absence of public funding, we believe initiatives such as Sparks have made tangible strides in promoting co-operation and driving improvements in local high streets. It has helped people who normally may not feel arts and culture is for them to understand that it is by embedding it through experiences in the store. Sparks has also helped influence the City Centre Development Plan by providing a hopeful inspiring vision of what 21st Century retail and high streets could look like.”

Kat, ASLS

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## INFLUENCING LOCAL POLICY - INSPIRING POSITIVE CHANGE

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“Despite the fact that in Bristol there is lots of empty office space, the price of office space has soared. Artists can't rent affordable studio space, Bristolians can't afford rent but buildings are still being snapped up to develop Grade A office space and student accommodation. London office occupancy rates are less than half pre-Covid levels in the UK, at about 35 per cent. As more developments spring up in isolation it is more important for councils to have local plans for their high streets and balancing long-term vision and strategic planning with short-term pressures and immediate needs. We felt that an iconic building like Sparks provided us with an opportunity to provide a very visible model showing the impact of investing in culture.

The planning process plays a crucial role in shaping the success or failure of a high street at the local level. Inclusive and participatory planning can ensure that the needs of the local community are adequately addressed. Often new buildings are looked at in silos rather than in context of the whole area and strain on transport, medical services and schools for example. Effective planning can prevent us from having 'ghost' cities, dictate the spatial layout and govern what types of businesses can operate on the high street, where they can be located and how the area is developed. If planning is effective it will ensure a richly diverse mix of businesses, appropriate infrastructure and pedestrian-friendly streets...

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Just as in architecture we talk about the importance of 'flexible floor plates', high streets should be designed with flexibility in mind to accommodate changing needs and uses over time. High streets should combine commercial, residential, community and recreational spaces, as well as adaptable building designs that can be easily repurposed or modified without tearing them down, so that the embodied carbon in their construction is not lost. Embracing sustainable development practices can help high streets mitigate the impacts of climate change, reduce energy consumption and promote environmental stewardship. Engaging with local communities and stakeholders throughout the redevelopment process is also essential for building consensus, fostering ownership and ensuring that high streets reflect the wants and needs of the people who live and work there.

Preserving the cultural heritage and identity of high streets is important for maintaining their unique character. In the absence of a cultural heritage, developments could work with local communities to build one. Redevelopment efforts should incorporate strategies to protect historic buildings, landmarks and protect or create cultural assets. Fostering cultural diversity, promoting creative expression and providing support for local and independent businesses is critical for maintaining the economic vitality of high streets.”

Kat, ASLS

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“We were delighted to see Sparks cited as an exemplar in Bristol's City Centre Development Plan which set out the council's commitment to establish Broadmead as a local, regional and national destination for sustainable shopping, diversify the Shopping Quarter from an area of consumption to a place of broader experience and exchange and to transform the full spine from Nelson Street to Cabot Circus into a pedestrian priority area to create a cultural corridor.

We need to fill the empty spaces with creative, cultural, green and fun things. I really like Sparks with its crossover between arts and climate action: we need more of that but there for the long term. Why not spread that ethos across the whole of Broadmead!”

Jenny, GGC

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## CITY CENTRE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Bristol City Centre Development and Delivery Plan states that the city centre will play a more significant role in the community and cultural life of the city, providing more spaces, services and facilities to support community and cultural activity.

Key approaches will be to create new spaces for community and cultural facilities (and funding streams to support them) through:

- New development and by working with private sector partners.
- Form a Community Land Vehicle for securing new sustainable city centre spaces for community and cultural uses and protecting these in perpetuity.
- Rethink how ground floor spaces controlled by Bristol City Council and partners or vacant spaces can

be better used for community and cultural uses.

- Create a programme of events, pop-ups and temporary installations which re-use vacant buildings and underutilised spaces.
- The approach to diversifying the visitor offer includes:
- Locating more community facilities, indoor and outdoor community spaces and convenience retail in the city centre which provide day-to-day reasons for local residents to use the city centre.
- Integrating culture into the visitor offer through provision for cultural spaces, destinations and events to support vibrancy and cultural participation.
- Supporting more independent and local businesses which contribute to the distinctive character of the city centre and support the resilience of the foundational economy.



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“The cultural strategy sets out an objective to protect a portion of the ground floor space of new developments for community and cultural use. As part of this, options could be explored to develop an appropriate vehicle such as a Land Trust for securing new city centre spaces for community and cultural uses and importantly, protecting these in perpetuity. The vehicle would work collaboratively with developers to identify and secure spaces, and match community and cultural uses to these.

One of our biggest concerns when starting Sparks is that, if we were here for a while, we would become so needed by the local communities that we would leave a massive hole for them if we were to leave. Our hope is that with this policy change, communities won't be left without community spaces when meanwhile spaces end, and instead the meanwhile use can be a great opportunity to trial what works and what doesn't work for communities in an area.”

Kat, ASLS



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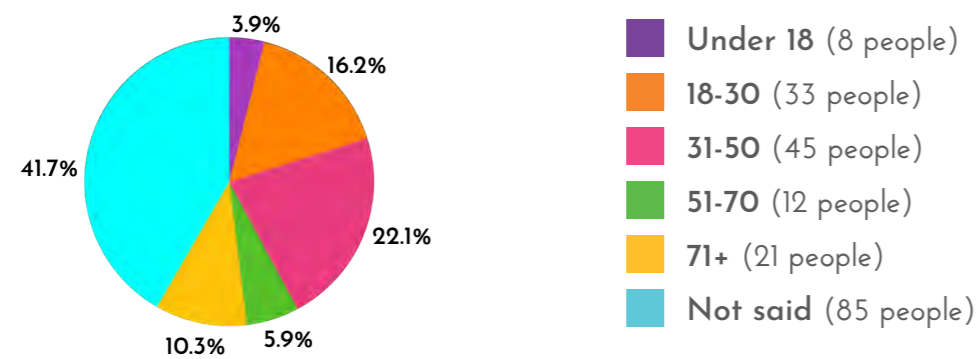


# APPENDIX A

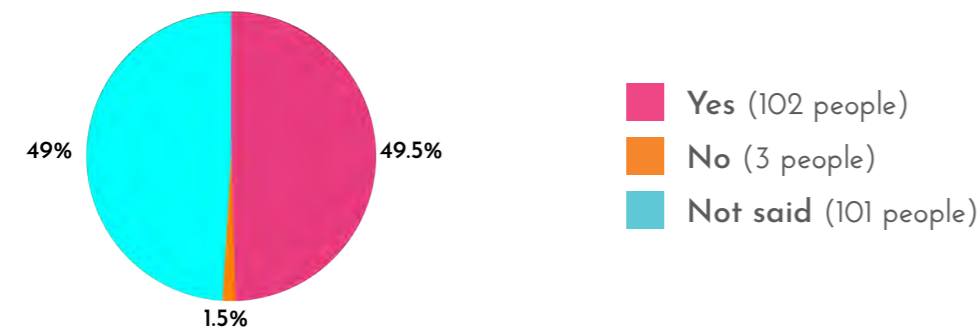
Data Capture 13/03/23 - 20/03/24

- 293 people have taken the survey so far
- 86 of those people pressed 'Start' and then did not complete the survey (these 86 people are not counted as part of the results in the followingslides)
- 3 people completed the entire survey
- 204 people part completed the survey

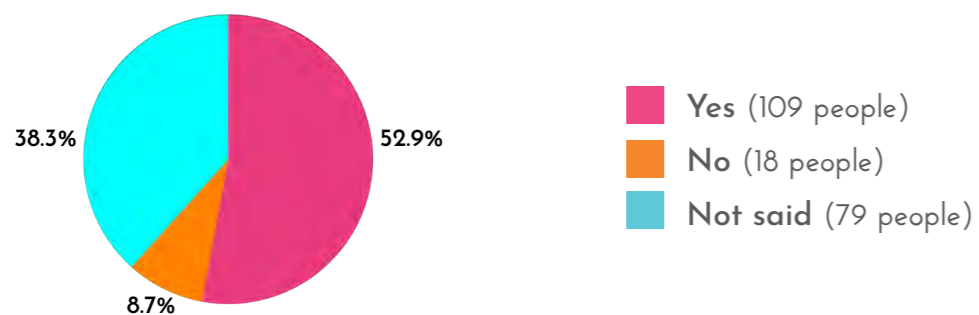
## 1. HOW OLD ARE YOU?



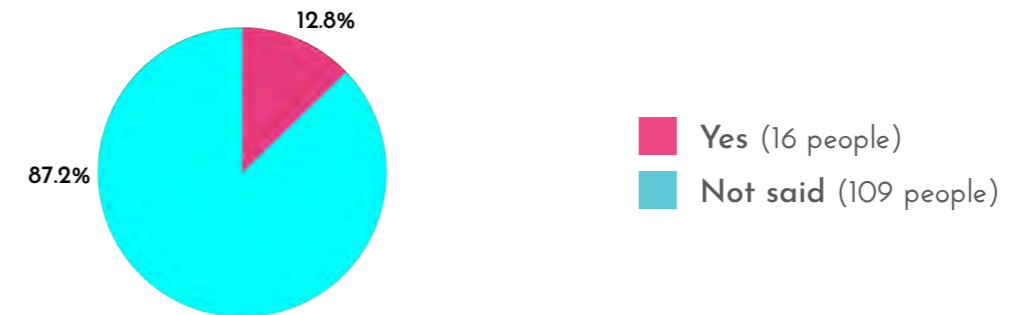
## 2. DO YOU FEEL HAPPIER AFTER VISITING SPARKS?



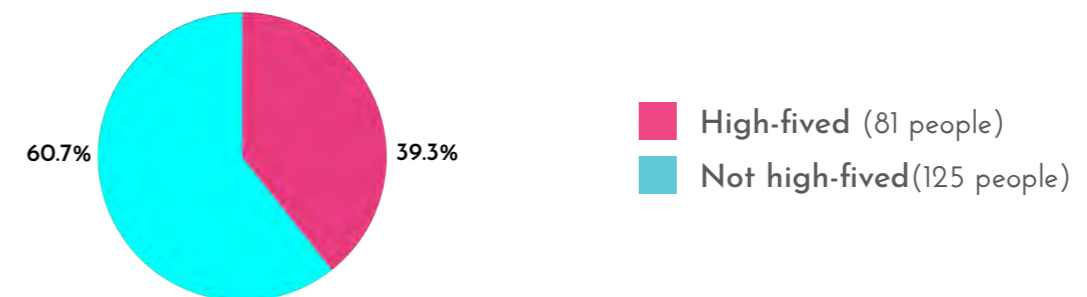
## 3. DO YOU THINK SPARKS IS LGBTQ+ FRIENDLY?



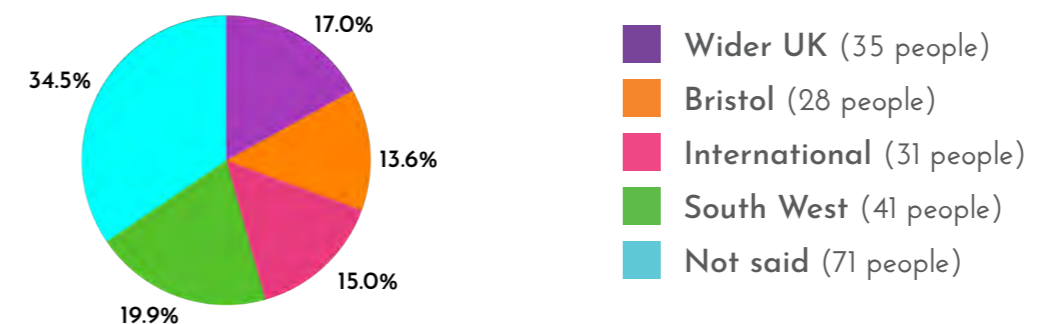
## 4. HAS SPARKS INSPIRED YOU TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT?



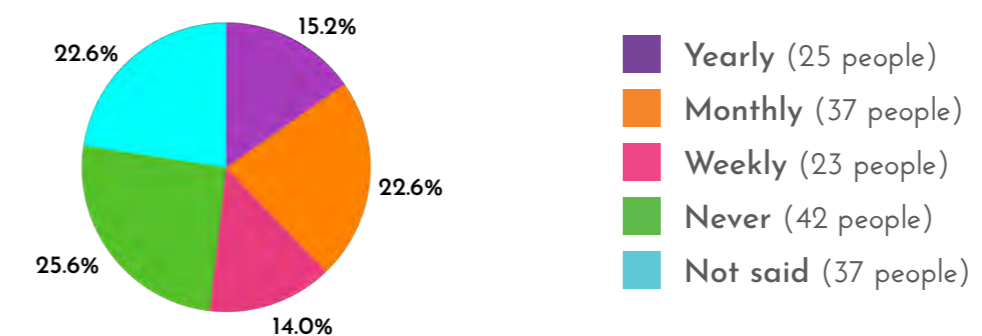
## 5. HIGH-FIVE IF YOU LOVED VISITING SPARKS



## 6. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?



## 7. HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND CULTURAL EVENTS?



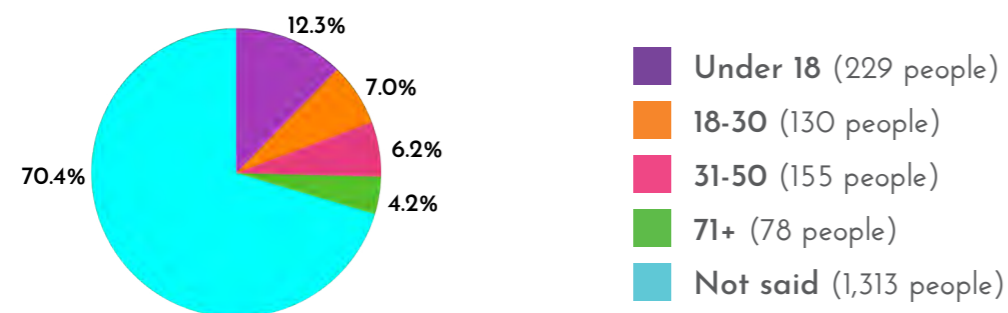


# APPENDIX B

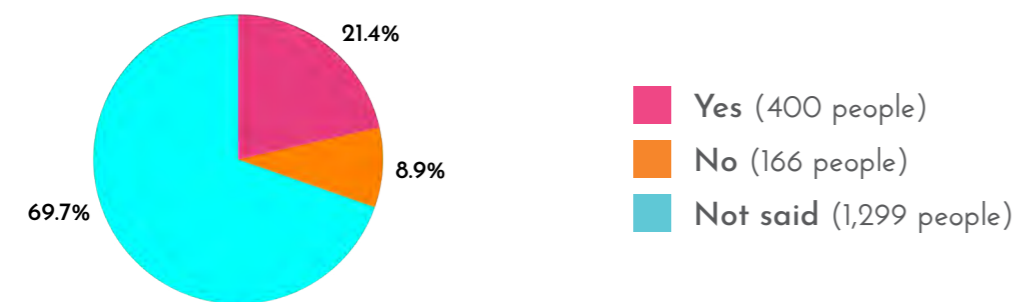
Data Capture 20/03/24 - 05/04/24

- Since our last update, over 1800 have interacted in the survey in some way!
- 132 fully completed the survey
- And 1,212 people part-completed the survey

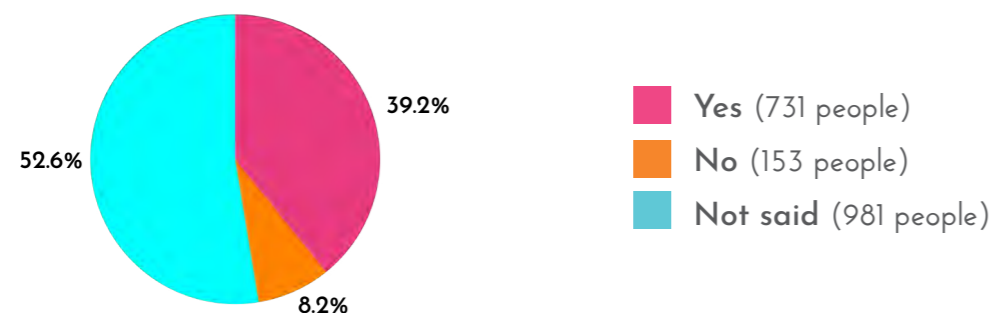
## 1. HOW OLD ARE YOU?



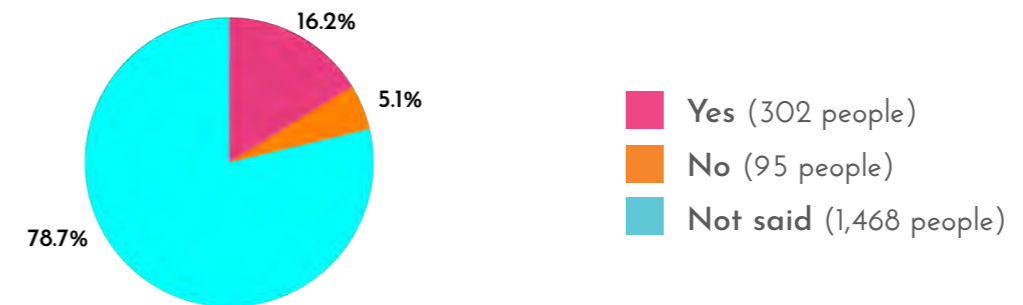
## 2. DO YOU FEEL HAPPIER AFTER VISITING SPARKS?



## 3. DO YOU THINK SPARKS IS LGBTQ+ FRIENDLY?



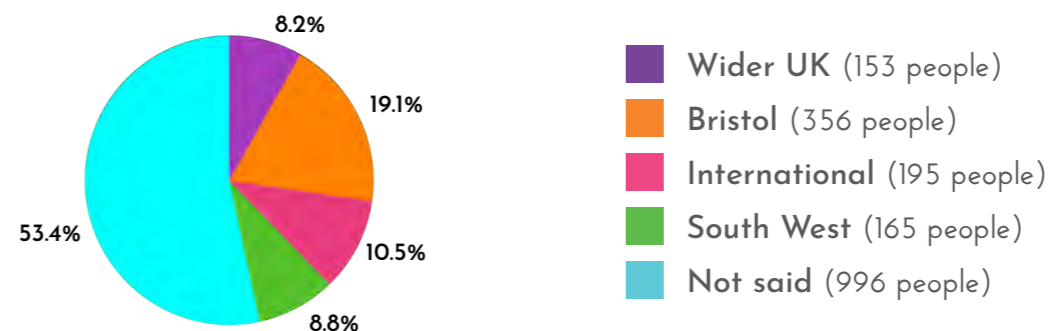
## 4. HAS SPARKS INSPIRED YOU TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT?



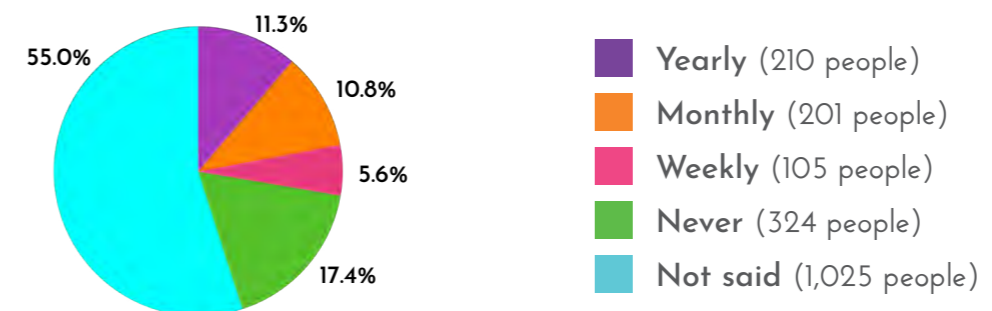
## 5. HIGH-FIVE IF YOU LOVED VISITING SPARKS



## 6. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?



## 7. HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND CULTURAL EVENTS?







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