

## How We Did It: Starting a Local Property Partnership



Councils want high streets to thrive for local benefit. Asset owners want exciting, impact-driven opportunities for vacant buildings. Communities have amazing ideas for their neighbourhoods, but struggle to access the space to make them happen.

How do you bring all of this together to make a positive change to your local high street?

In this instalment of our ‘How We Did It’ series, Lorinda Freint from Richmond and Wandsworth Councils and Bex Trevalyan from Platform Places introduce Local Property Partnerships – a process to unlock town centre buildings – and explain how they got started in Wandsworth Town.

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What was Platform Places set up to achieve and why did you start working with Wandsworth Council?

Bex: [Platform Places](#) is a UK wide, cross-sector movement made up of councils, community entrepreneurs and major asset owners. New Local was a co-founding partner, alongside the High Streets Task Force, the British Property Federation, Legal and General, and Power to Change.

We came together with a mission to unlock town centre buildings for amazing ideas and businesses that can help us live affordably, sustainably and together. The reason we came together around this mission was because we shared a common challenge: on the one hand, high street vacancies are increasing, major retail is collapsing – including Debenhams,

Topshop, Wilko – and suddenly there are these big spaces available on our high streets. And on the other hand, you have a lot of community led organisations, social enterprises, people wanting to run reuse and repair hubs, open arts and music venues or urban farms, deliver affordable childcare, housing or warm hubs, people who want to access space but are struggling. They can't access space that is affordable, secure and long term on their high street.

That's the challenge we came together around: how can we match make empty spaces and asset owners with people who want to use space and bring them together in a way that builds trust and relationships and creates long term outcomes for our places. The model that we have come to is one that's already working and that brings together, at a local level, asset owners, councils and community entrepreneurs to form some kind of local property partnership, or local assets partnership. And we've been inspired by successful models like Hastings Commons, Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth, Historic Coventry Trust, and Meanwhile in Oxfordshire.

The reason we have just started this journey with Wandsworth Council is threefold. The first is because there is political leadership and buy in. Councillor Kemi Akinola was part of the codesign conversations for Platform Places and said, Hey, Wandsworth is ripe for this, let's do this here. Secondly, there is community leadership and buy in. We have partnered with Brendan Conway who is an experienced community assets leader. He lives in Wandsworth town and is really passionate about community led development, is a chartered surveyor by background and has a lot of people around him that are doing exactly this work. Thirdly, there is need: one in five town centre units are vacant in Wandsworth Town.

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Lorinda, from the point of view of the council, why did you want to start working with Platform Places? What were the problems you were trying to address?

Lorinda: The situation in Wandsworth Town, one of the town centres in the borough of Wandsworth, will be familiar to a lot of people. COVID lockdowns had an impact on our high streets but things had started going wrong long before that: online shopping, the crisis in retail, vacancies appearing in the town centre, and businesses slow to respond to the new reality. People kept trying to revive retail only without looking at other options, and it was clear to us that there had to be new thinking around town centres. Out of that came the decision to run a pilot with Platform Places.

Can you tell us about the initial mapping exercise you did to really understand the local area?

Bex: Part of the challenge that we find in places is that both from a council and community perspective, it's often hard to know who the asset owners are on our high streets. How do we contact them? How do we bring them to the table? The initial mapping activity aimed to find out who owns the building, and who wants the buildings. So who are the grassroots leaders with ideas? Who are the existing local traders who need a bigger or better space?

To map who owns the high street we first started by defining the scope. We zoomed in on four different roads around Wandsworth high street, and there were about 150-200 commercial units as part of that. We then used a tool called Land Insight to look up the owners of each of those buildings, and to work out what type of owner they are. What are their incentives and motivations? Are they an institutional owner that has ESG objectives and social value mandates who might be an ally? Are they a development company that is just trying to make a quick buck? Are they an offshore fund that might be land banking, more interested in the land value uplift than the rental revenue? Getting a sense of these motivations helped us understand the lay of the land.

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On top of creating our database of commercial unit owners, we collected local stories and intelligence. We had calls once a week with Lorinda, Brendan, and the people Brendan brought to the table to gather that local intelligence. What do we know about the different owners and who might be an ally? Through the mapping we found that 60% of the commercial units were privately owned, just under 40% were publicly owned, and less than 1% were community owned or third sector owned. But we also looked at who was leasing the buildings and we saw that if you take into account the long leases, 95%+ of Wandsworth Town is privately controlled. And that starts to explain some of what's going on – there's a lot of profit motivation here and there's a lot of ownership that's not local. Obviously, that's without nuance and it's a bit of a generalisation. There are different types of landlords and different types of motivations. But there was a general narrative and trend that we saw emerging. At the same time, we also interviewed third sector leaders, local businesses and local people to map who wanted the buildings and spaces, and who had ideas for them.

Why did you decide to host a dinner? How did you organise it and who was in the room?

Bex: The dinner is a really important part of our approach. It gets people to take off their professional corporate hats, it gets people out from behind their emails and into a room where we can have a human conversation and build trust and relationships. We created a guestlist which included a mix of local entrepreneurs, asset owners and people from different parts of the council. The location was important – we hosted the dinner in a beautiful church that's been converted for community use. We had a brilliant storyteller from Wandsworth Town tell us a bit of the history of Wandsworth to get people's imaginations flowing, thinking about where we have come from in order to understand where we might go together. We had four tables, and around each table was a mix of those stakeholders.

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At my table I was sitting with a couple of people from the council, a couple of local entrepreneurs and three major institutional asset owners. Over delicious Mediterranean food we talked about our personal connection to Wandsworth and our hopes and ideas that we would like to see in the town centre. What's missing? How can we each help? What can we

each bring? And by the end of the dinner, the three asset owners were saying, what do you need? I can offer you these spaces on peppercorn rent for as long as you need. And that was the moment we realised this approach works, and we needed to host these dinners regularly to build the momentum and get community businesses into vacant spaces so they can start activating our high streets.



Property Partnership Dinner



Property Partnership Dinner

**Lorinda, how was the dinner from your perspective? How easy was it to get other people in the council to come along?**

Lorinda: It needed patience, communication, and lots of reassurance that this was a dinner where we were simply going to meet different stakeholders; there weren't going to be any demands made on the night, they could just come along, hear what it was all about and talk to stakeholders. Of course, one of the roles of a council officer is to listen to and engage with stakeholders, and I made clear that this was an opportunity to do that. So we had very good attendance from council departments in the end, including planning, assets, community engagement and arts. From my point of view it was an enormous success – they were all round the table and had the opportunity to talk to each other, to listen to each other's viewpoints, to understand each other's challenges. Very often people only look at their own point of view and what they are trying to achieve, so having the opportunity to listen to others is very important.

**What happened after the dinner and what's the plan now?**

Lorinda: In terms of the outcomes so far, a major asset owner has agreed for a community enterprise to have access to a unit at peppercorn rent. We are also working on a live proposal with a major asset owner to lease and activate multiple units for at least three years. It is still early days and we are looking at this as ongoing – this is only phase one, this was our first dinner and there will be others.

Can you give us an idea of what a new type of town centre might look like? What organisations and spaces might open up as a result of these conversations?

Bex: What we heard from the people we interviewed in Wandsworth Town is there's a real need for mixed use community hubs, creative spaces and youth led spaces that can provide training and skill development – something to do that's not just sitting on the park bench or somewhere you have to pay to access like a pub. There was a lot of demand for trees and green spaces like an urban farm or community growing space to bring a connection to food right into inner city London. People also wanted warm hubs or combined services hubs, and this is something the council thought was a good idea. Other suggestions included circular economy hubs and maker spaces, libraries of things, a bike repair hub to promote active travel and a business incubator to help nurture some of these ideas into businesses so that you have in the business support as one of the offerings.

It's not just about the businesses we see popping up above the surface – the 'mushrooms' if you like. It's the web of relationships and networks that happens under the surface, which can take time to build and which allows those mushrooms to fruit. Building those networks, relationships and that sense of belonging is key – Wandsworth is my place, I can do something in it, it offers me a platform for my creativity and relationships, it offers something for my children and my grandparents, there's something for everyone here. That's the feeling of the place we're trying to build together.