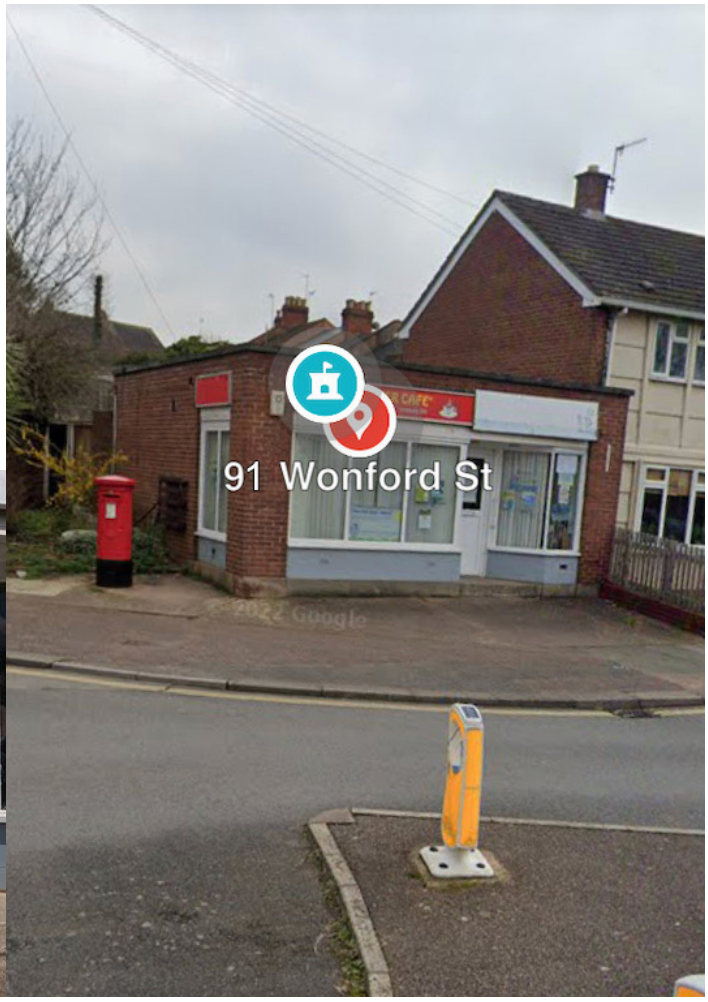
Wonford Old Post Office

In early 2023 Art Work Exeter were asked by the local Community Builder (Barbara Beames) to look at this premises and scope out a plan of action (see additional document) to bring it back into community use. We included it in an Arts Council England bid, as a creative community engagement project and received funding for the planning work plus two creative practitioners to conduct a day's activity; we also received ECC and DCC funding to support an extra person and extra days for the team and to underwrite some of the expenses.





The building is a single-storey, flat-rooofed unit from the late 1960's. It was a Post Office serving the local community until the 1980's. From the 1990's to 2010's it has been a focus for a variety of community groups and served a number of different agencies and organisations as a point of contact and service delivery space. The building was filled with accumulated furniture and fixtures, much of it delapidated and outside any regulation. The main room had been painted a bright indistrial yellow and the external areas around the building were also very overgrown and filled with detritus.





On the 5th and 6th August, the AWE team of three were joined by two community members and we moved the furniture, took down the blinds and curtains and painted the main room in a neutral Turtle Dove Grey. We cleaned the windows and installed vinyls with questions for the local community to consider:

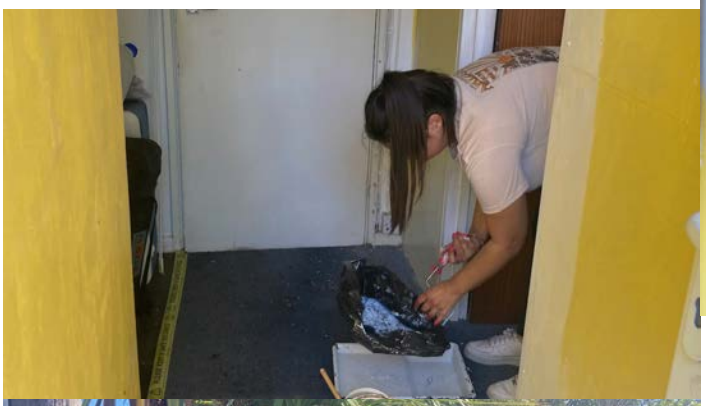
What could be here?
What is important to you?
What do you need here?

Through Neighbourly we recruited a team of ten volunteers from the Coca Cola regional distribution team and on the 16th they cleared all of the outside space at the side and back of the building over the course of six hours. This included mature and overgrown grasses, brambles and weeds, empty cans, vehicle tyres, broken patio furniture and plastic plant pots.

On the 18th we employed Shift It, a local disposal company, to take all of the materials from the outside spaces, much of the furniture and soft furnishings and other items that had accumulated in the building. These included two lots of vehicle seats, two previous kitchen unit sets, soiled chairs, and the curtains and blinds which were disintegrating.









During the time that we were around the area in the month leading up to the event 22 people stopped by to chat, look inside the building and tell us their family connections, memories or anecdotes about the Post Office and the various clubs and groups which had been there.















On the day

We opened the doors from 10am to 4pm.

Flora drew a timeline on the end windows in white chalk paint and supported visitors to contribute to it.

Jess talked with people and encouraged them to make collages of their thoughts and ideas, which further people added post-it notes and coloured dots to, so show their support.

Stuart talked with people, served tea, coffee and biscuits and supported the making of LEGO models to illustrate some of the ideas.

27 people stopped by and spent a varying amount of time, contributing to the various creative engagements and sharing conversations. It was interesting to note that none of the people who came in knew each other previously, yet all lived locally and had some connection with the building. As well as these, there were some of the previous people who contributed ideas, and even two people who posted something through the door, along with apologies for not being able to attend.

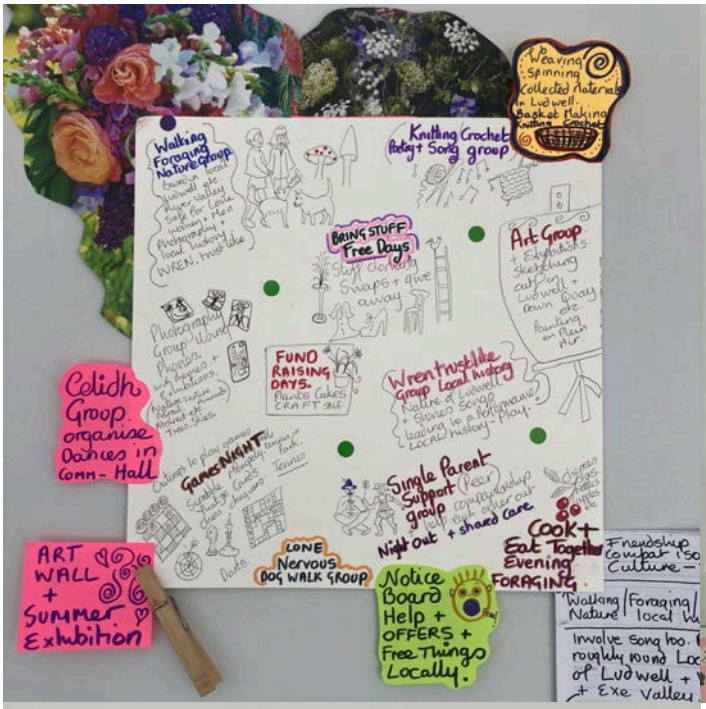






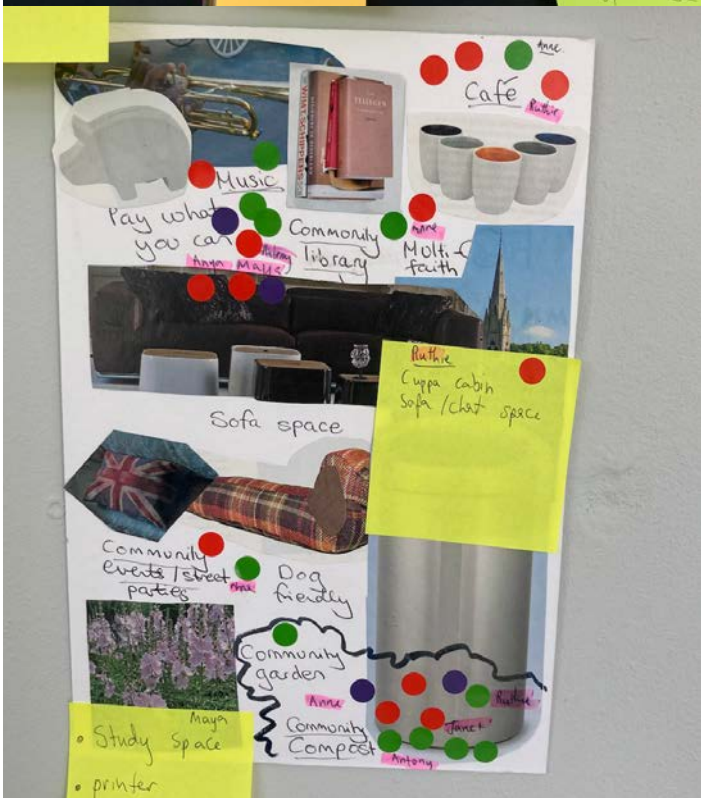












Major Themes

A community resource

Solar-powered phone charging and Wifi hotspot.
Community composting, for people who don't have space to do it at home, but would benefit.
A small fruit bush & tree garden outside.
Regular skill-share sessions and workshops for people looking to learn domestic skills - painting and decorating - planting and propagating - baking and basic meals - foraging and bushcraft.
Book swap library.
Community Notice Board.
Tool library.
Drop-in clinics for professional outreach - financial advice - parenting - benefits - housing - employment - Council services - etc.
Study corner.
Basic printing facility.
Warm space.
Community wash/dry facility.
Permanent low-impact exercise facilities.
Opportunities to volunteer/ work/ be a part of something.

A meeting spot

An inclusive place where people can come together before or after activities in the wider community - dog walkers - foraging groups - street planters - historical/ cultural walks - en plein air painting group - joggers - litter picks - trips further afield.
Somewhere for small meetings and gatherings for organising community events, street parties, Neighbourhood Watch, support groups.
Decent coffee/ refreshments on a pay-what-you-can basis.

A breakfast/ snack bar.
Conversation cafe.
Sober pub.
Soft play for toddlers or sensory room.

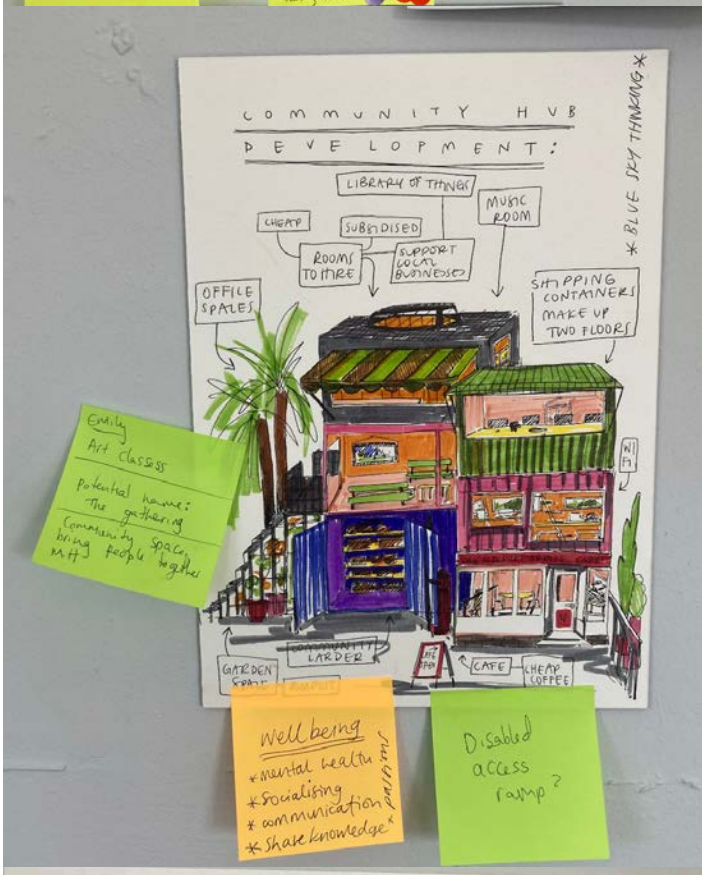
A cultural space

Pop-up cinema nights.
Bring-your-own craft sessions. Knit & Natter.
Art wall/ selling space.
Games nights.
Poetry, song and spoken word nights.
Low-key musical performance events.
Exhibition and celebration space.
Visiting artist workshops and one-off creative sessions.
Regular creative sessions.
Social co-creating crafts like knitting and crochet projects.
A regular youth-oriented space.
Reading groups/ sessions.
Open studio sessions for creatives co-working and sharing resources.
Cultural learning/ sharing events.
Environmentally-sensitive crafts with local materials - weaving - spinning.
Locally-responsive activities - cyanotypes - leaf printing - histories and stories.

A flexible space

Repair Cafe.
Bike clinic.
Visiting gym equipment & coach.
Clothes mending sessions.
FabLab on tour.
Pop-up vintage shop.
Jumble sale.
Plants, cakes and craft sales.
Swap shop and Free Market.
Seed and Plant exchange/ swap.
A place for bulk-buying distribution (food and home products).
Pop-up restaurant/ food nights.
Processing workshops for foraged food and creative materials - jams - cosmetics - dyes and pigments.









Analysis

The first fundamental conclusion is that an entity would be needed to hold all of the disparate ideas and suggestions - no one idea is big enough to stand alone. No existing organisation or group has arisen as a natural fit or came forward. It would need to be a third sector organisation, to be able to liaise with the sheer variety of partners and types of practitioners and initiatives suggested.

It is important to learn from past projects and initiatives, to build on them and not replicate mistakes. Previous ventures in the building had been successful when they were able to be contained by the space - bigger initiatives ended up going elsewhere and facing rising costs and similar difficulties. Operations that were held by single entities, such as St Vincent de Paul were able to offer stability/ continuity but were limited by capacity and intentions of the operating team and ultimately stopped due to lack of external funding.

Local people were interested in thinking about what could be there and visioning themselves as a part of it. A large number of people spoke of what they could give and contribute to a reimagined space. These were professionals and business owners as well as hobbyists and people who already volunteer elsewhere.

There are a number of successful initiatives and groups already running in the area who could be beneficial allies, even if the space isn't suitable for their agenda. In terms of capacity, there appears to be a rich vein of willing people to do something, with a broad range of interests that could sustain an ongoing operation. A local martial arts instructor felt it could be a good occasional physical learning space for his practice; a local baker considered it could be good for a 'neighbourhood pizza restaurant'. These all require a 'Pop-up flexible infrastructure' rather than a permanent single entity.

Only a few of the ideas were income-generating as their main operation, such as providing refreshments, solar panels and a number of classes and activities that could be paid for. Otherwise the space would rely on a mixture of community/ arts funding to underwrite any activity and necessary infrastructure and management. This could be conducted by a standalone, purpose-founded initiative, requiring a small amount of governance but would still need to have a bank account, etc. However, the initial engagement suggests that there aren't enough people from the community engaged to support the setting up of a company just yet.



Proposal

Art Work Exeter CIC would be prepared to draft a programme of activity and engagements with a broad range of local and regional organisations and initiatives to be delivered from the Old Post Office. This would be based on the suggestions by local residents and what is available in the city. We would seek to fund this through **Reaching Communities** from the National Lottery Fund - where we have a good track record. This funding can run for up to five years.

Our intention would be to start a process of prototyping - providing examples for local people to vote for with their presence. Alongside this, we would support grassroots development of peoples' own interest activities and sessions. This building would be viewed as a safe space for people to try things out and build stronger connections. After the funded period, we would be in a place to support any localy-initiated activity to fund itself in the venue if this was appropriate.

AWE would need to do this work in partnership with Exeter City Council - the property owners. AWE has a track record of Meanwhile Use and similar leasing and occupying commercial property for cultural activity, but this relies upon ***peppercorn rent and waiving Business Rates*** to be feasible.

The building
The building will require some internal structural work, to make the bathroom accessible. We suggest moving the wall, combining the toilet with both sink areas to create a large bathroom. It will also need the electrical wiring to be improved (sockets fitted) in the rear part of the building. There is no central heating in the building, (so we would intend to begin in the spring 2024 to avoid this being an issue to start off with) and the windows have a variety of glazing throughout. The external rear gate would need attention as it is currently screwed shut and the hinges have rusted through.

Infrastructure
We would reveiw the possibility of solar panels (potentially as art works) for generating electricity, to provide free wifi and phone charging. In line with the flexible pop-up nature of use - a number of tables and chairs will be needed for most activities, these would need to be practical and adaptable. A set for internal and a set for external use. We would intend to install an oven in the kitchen area (may need an additional line in the fusebox) and to purchase a simple bean-to-cup coffee machine.

Management
We would base our operations out of this building and perform scheduling and management as a part of our annual programme, tying in with events and activities in other parts of the city. Organisationally we would intend to recruit two Cultural Producers and a team of volunteers from the neighbourhood to support the running of the space. We would seek to tie in activities with existing organisations such as the Community Centre, Wynstream School and Wonford Methdist Church as well as Wonford Planters, Krafty Kafe and the Squilometre. People will be supported to pursue qualifications and certification that could also help them in their career elsewhere ie: 1st Aid training, Food Hygiene Certificate.



Art Work Exeter