

Maidstone Borough Council Creative Arts Hub Report

Report Issued - August 2023



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Report Details

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Project Brief

Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) is looking at ways of supporting The Arts in Maidstone to boost the creative industry and facilitate the launch of a Creative Hub and maker space within the town centre. The objective of this feasibility report is to provide direction and advice to Maidstone Borough Council regarding the development of a strategic approach towards identifying potential business models, type of businesses, potential rental income and locations to launch a Creative Arts Hub and maker space. This will support the town centre regeneration and create longer term solutions to improve The Arts offer within the borough.

This report will look at the viability of creating a Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone Town Centre:

Consideration and identification of the location and size of unit being suitable for a Creative Arts Hub that could include creative spaces, studios, makers and sellers space, exhibition space, a music studio, music venue and a cafe.

- What potential levels of rental income could Maidstone Borough Council expect?
- What business models could Maidstone Borough Council utilise?
- What options are available to MBC regarding the type of businesses that could potentially be included in a Creative Arts Hub?
- What are the current town centre opportunities available to MBC? Including the possibility of Len House
- What are the potential risks of MBC undertaking the project of creating a Creative Arts Hub? How could these risks be managed?

Retail Inspired are pleased to have been commissioned by Maidstone Borough Council to produce a feasibility study to help them explore the possibility of launching a Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone Town Centre to help to boost the creative industry across the borough and facilitate the project working alongside Arts organisations currently operating within the borough. By commissioning this feasibility report MBC hope to develop a more strategic approach to towards the longer term viability and growth of The Arts in the town centre and across Kent.

Executive Summary

It is recognised that the once dominant retail model within Town Centres up and down the country is in decline, and that the pandemic accelerated some of the already emerging trends as to the way communities shopped, interacted and used their town centres changed. Town Centres continue to be pivotal and at the heart of our communities, and there is an opportunity to support the structural changes that are happening with creative solutions that will not only support current high street issues including the reduction in retail, but create cultural opportunities to support the evolution and sustainability of our high streets and the development of the creative sector.

Covid 19 inevitably changed consumer behaviour as people sought ways to support their local high streets digitally and those businesses that were able to adapt have continued to evolve. The pandemic has also changed the way people live and work which is opening up opportunities for new business types to emerge and support a more localised economy.

This localised creative sector trend is emerging across the UK, including Kent and will continue to play a vital role in contributing to the revival of our town centres. It is vital to understand how our town centres, businesses, local authorities and other stakeholders innovate and evolve to meet the needs of customers, creating unique experiences and experimental uses supporting town centres to have a diverse retail, Arts and leisure mix, supporting job creation and the viability of the local economy.

Maidstone, as with many other Town centres across the UK is facing a period of change and face issues that require sustained structural and creative solutions. A new purpose and balance of businesses to support the existing town centre offer, including Fremlin Walk, The Mall and other stakeholders including One Maidstone need to reflect the changing consumer habits, thus embracing growing 'creative' and culture sector trends. The recent emergence of Creative Arts Hubs in other areas within Kent supports the narrative of addressing current high street challenges and creating initiatives supporting wider town centre placemaking strategies. Supporting and facilitating creative start-ups, occupying vacant retail units with innovative uses or transforming historic buildings to boost local employment and skills will support the local economy and increase tourism.

Maidstone is home to more than 7,000 businesses and 180,000 residents and is placed at the forefront of growth and innovation within Kent, with so many start ups choosing Maidstone to open their business there is an opportunity for MBC, as a wide and exciting range of SME's and creative industry companies are already based within the borough. This Kentish town is only 37 miles away from London with two train stations making this an accessible and attractive place to work and live.

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Maidstone Borough Council is currently enhancing the town centre to further improve the destination as a high-quality location for retail and leisure and has commissioned We Made That to undertake a Town Centre Strategy. A major programme of works is underway to improve the public realm, giving the town centre a more pedestrianised feel, to create a fantastic and accessible environment to live and work in.

As a result of the regeneration, the connectivity and aesthetics of Maidstone town centre will be enhanced, enabling Maidstone to maintain its place as one of the premier town centres in Kent. 'Kent's County Town'. The project will deliver a distinctive, safe and high-quality place that befits a 21st Century County Town. Maidstone Borough Council and their property team has already transformed The Lockmeadow complex as a key destination for leisure activities in the town centre and to support one of its five strategic priorities to make Maidstone a 'Thriving Place'. MBC launched an exciting Food Hall in 2021 attracting new local food and drink businesses making the complex an attractive and compelling destination for residents and visitors.

Our experience and recent research shows that Maidstone being Kent's premier town has a number of number of Arts organisations operating within the borough including Maidstone Area Arts Partnership (MAAP), Maidstone Arts Group and Maidstone Art Society supporting creatives within Maidstone and delivering a number of initiatives for the community. Our research has also highlighted the distinct lack of a physical space to bring together some of the great projects that are delivered by the creative businesses within Maidstone. This is an opportunity both in terms of bringing variety, identity and subsequently adding prosperity and footfall to the town centre as a whole.

From our knowledge of high streets and the creative industry both in terms of the rise in the number of Arts organisations, Arts businesses, CIC's and social enterprises operating within the borough and the proactive Arts groups within Maidstone borough, it is evident that by developing a Creative Arts Hub within the town centre would help elevate Maidstone to the forefront of providing an Arts provision for the creative community and assist the evolution of the high street. Other town centre businesses would undoubtedly prosper in this County town due to an increase in footfall.

From here we would recommend that MBC considers supporting the launch of a Creative Arts Hub to support the town centre and offer creative businesses operating within Maidstone Borough a platform to promote what they do, support others within the Arts and the future prosperity of the high street.

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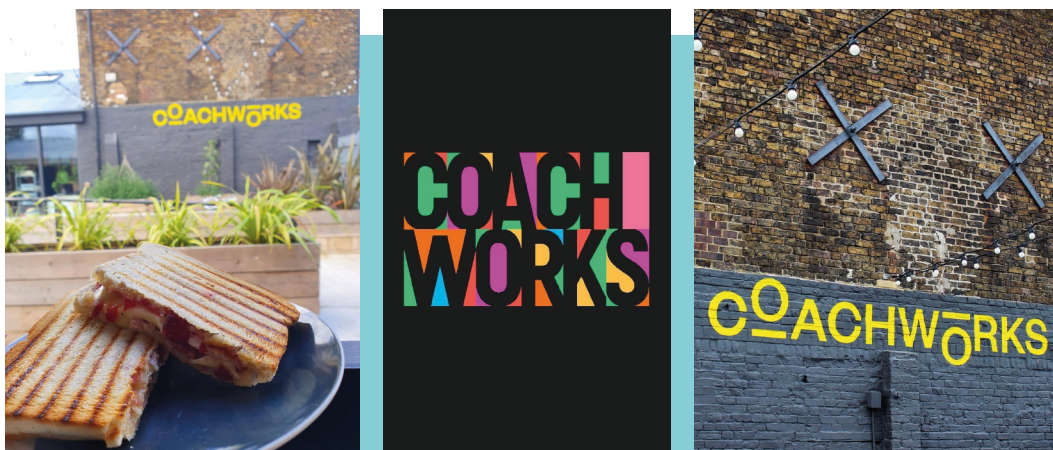
Our report has considered the options available to Maidstone Borough Council to be able to launch a Creative Arts Hub within Maidstone Town Centre:

The findings and recommendations of our report are:

- The location and flexibility of the space offered by Len House gives MBC the opportunity to establish a Creative Hub space suitable for incorporating a majority of what is being requested by the local Arts organisations including exhibition space, working space (studios) for local creative makers, a sound proof music studio/rehearsal space, rooms for hire and a shopfront to sell maker's product and include an element of incubator space. The location and flexibility of the additional properties detailed within Page 18 of this report each demonstrate the option of MBC operating a pop-up incubator Creative Hub in a smaller unit from around 700 -1500 sqft within Royal Star Arcade to a much larger, longer term unit such as 2-4 Granada House which is 3,000 sqft and offers the flexibility within the unit to include more of the requirements such as a café, makers selling space, exhibition space, creative co-working and workshops.
- Potential level of income would depend on the number of businesses, level of investment and number of studios available to rent and other commercial space, taking into consideration a variety of leasing options to allow creative businesses to test and operate their models.
- MBC have two main models to adopt depending on whether an operator is brought in to launch and manage the Creative Arts Hub as a Community Interest Company (CIC) or MBC retain control of leasing an agreed premises and nurturing creative businesses to support their future growth and success in Maidstone. Our recommendation is that MBC become the head leasee, managing the agreed premises and work closely with local Maidstone Arts organisations to attract their members and others in the community to operate their businesses from the Creative Arts Hub.
- The risks have been assessed, considered and documented; however launching a Creative Arts Hub would be one of the first in Kent and greatly support increasing the growing number creative sector businesses, the evolution and diversity of the town centre offer, increase dwell time and therefore contribute to the councils aspiration of Maidstone creating a place to work, live and play.

Creative and Cultural Sectors supporting Town Centres

There are many examples of the rise of the creative sector businesses and Community Arts Hubs opening across the UK including Kent and London. Stakeholders that are taking advantage of this opportunity within the creative sector are experiencing the direct benefits of establishing cultural and creative businesses within their high streets embedded as part of the wider town centre strategy – including job creation, increased footfall, dwell time and a more vibrant high street with a sustainable future.



Coachworks in Ashford is a unique example of a Creative Hub that combines an indoor and outdoor multi-use work space for start ups based in a building steeped in history. Meanwhile co-working space, studios and event hire. There are spaces to suit all creatives from market place studios that can be branded to suit your business type enabling businesses to choose opening hours with smaller overheads than your typical high street shop or space. There are also office studios to allow creatives to work alongside other SME's including meeting rooms and space to collaborate and grow. Additionally they offer monthly creative co-working spaces available, plus food and drink venues. This venue is a 'creative campus' a new social and cultural meeting place.

You will find: 1,571 metres of indoor and outdoor space, 12 studios, an artist in residence program, 7 food kiosks run by fledgling businesses, a hole in the wall barista, 2 bars, internal and external event spaces, exhibition space, market space and public space for community events.

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This development demonstrates what can be achieved to inject life into a town centre and create a meanwhile use for a council owned site. The Council purchased the site in 2014 and asked for submissions and ideas for an interim use and Coachworks was developed by Turner.Works. The company converted a collection of historic warehouses and industrial sheds into a innovative start-up workspace with a co-working incubator. The Council who invested in the construction and owns the land, receives part of the profit from their annual income.

The UK's town centres are undergoing a complete transformation as high streets struggle to fill empty units and buildings will need to be reimagined by stakeholders working together to create new experiences for customers and this includes the introduction of creative Hubs offering exhibitions, workshops, unique shopping experiences, intimate music venues and more.

Further Case Studies

The following case studies have been selected to demonstrate successful creative Hubs launched to support the current challenges being faced by high streets – they are each unique and provide a platform and space for The Arts, makers, education or event space and different types of ownership models.

Case Study – St George's Creative Hub, Gravesend

St George's Art Centre is an example of a Council owned asset that has been re-purposed and is being managed and run by Gravesham Borough Council. This new Arts Centre is an exhibition and arts space in the heart of Gravesend developed by Gravesham Borough Council in 2020 and is housed in the Council owned asset St George's Shopping Centre with two reconfigured former empty units. The Arts Centre promotes creative activity within the town centre with a state of the art exhibition space for 2D and 3D works, including digital installations. There is also a workshop and drop in space to meet local artists and enjoy a coffee in the community café whilst viewing the exhibitions or taking part in the community workshops. The Local authority have plans to develop the centre further to provide accommodation for an artists co-operative.



Case Study - Nucleus Arts

Nucleus Arts is home to 45 self contained artists studios, a gallery, meeting and community rooms for hire and a selection of café bars. They are one of the main studio providers in North Kent, so vacant spaces get snapped up quickly and there is currently a long waiting list. Studios vary in size and layout with prices starting from £100 per month and include utilities. There are many benefits to being part of the Nucleus Arts team including exclusive discounts to the café, creative opportunities and support unavailable elsewhere. Artists also find endless inspiration and support from being surrounded by fellow creatives working with varied mediums and styles, leading to collaborative opportunities and the chance to showcase work in multiple exhibitions at the Halpern Gallery.



Nucleus Arts have created more than just a space to rent a studio, as with the gallery, café and community workshops; as an artist you are part of a community being showcased to the wider public and building longevity and opportunity for your business in the creative sector.



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Case Study - Beach Creative, Herne Bay

Beach Creative is an example of a vibrant creative hub in heart of Herne Bay, Kent. This creative space runs with a social purpose and offers a place to try new concepts, meet people, share ideas and experiences and a space to hire. This is run as a Community Interest Company (CIC) and they support people on their creative journey and give artists and makers space to create and show their work and bring people together through creative experiences. Their exhibitions, events and learning opportunities are delivered to support the local people in Herne Bay by local artists. Also set within Beach Creative's ground floor there is a café that is run separately by an independent business and encourages footfall to the Creative Hub opening up opportunities for visitors and artists alike. There are studio spaces upstairs, a dark room, you can hire either of the two gallery spaces and one of the four rooms for events or meetings. The venue can also accommodate intimate music events or spoken word productions, so is a flexible venue space.



Case Study - Made in Ashford and The Craftship CIC

Made in Ashford started its life originally as a pop up shop in 2015 developed by Ashford Borough Council and is an excellent example of a Council owned asset being brought to life to support the evolution of the high street and supporting the creative industry. Fast forward to 2023 and Made in Ashford is now a CIC – a collaborative shop and The Craftship CIC, a social enterprise dedicated to supporting local artists and creative businesses as well as helping more people access creativity in the local community.

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This project is still supported by the local council and also promoted through Love Ashford a digital high street managed by Ashford Borough Council. Made in Ashford has grown and is now home to over 70 Kent based artists and makers and there has been the addition of The Craft Ship Enterprise, a workshop space supporting the Made in Ashford team to offer an array of community workshops, including pottery painting, Jewellery making, watercolour painting, additionally this space can also be hired for external workshops and meetings. Some of the makers/artists from Made in Ashford have developed 'craft kits' that can be purchased from The Craftship to take home and make, or allow customers to utilise the workshop space to create product.

Made in Ashford have seller's spaces that are permanent and fixed, keeping the continuity of the aesthetic and have tailored sections to suit individual makers needs from shelf only spaces to wall and shelf spaces, ranging from £5 - £9 per week and 25% commission on every sale. They have created licences that don't require makers to work instore and created incentives for those who do, reducing commission payable depending on the number of days worked. Designer makers benefit both financially and from gaining insights into consumer behaviour giving them the opportunity to learn and grow their business.

From our experience of launching pop up shops to permanent shops, Jo Wynn-Carter created the original Made in Ashford brand, a shop share as part of Ashford Borough Council's purchase of Park Mall Shopping Centre showcasing designer makers to test the high street for a longer period. She worked closely with the designers to develop the brand strategy and promote the shop more widely, offering tailored business support and devising marketing campaigns. This unique approach ensured that Made in Ashford complimented the high street offer with bespoke handmade products by talented local makers from Kent, elevating Ashford town centre's consumer footfall within the south east to discover unique businesses, resulting in the subsequent evolution of Made in Ashford to what it is today.



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Consideration of the Location and Size of the Units being suitable for a Creative Arts Hub

There are a number of factors when considering the location of a Creative Arts Hub within a Town centre:

Place, community and location are all elements to consider when taking forward a project to support the high street and the creative sector, and Hubs are as much sociable and building network spaces as they are for doing business, so this is something that is valued by creatives who often work alone and find connectivity with likeminded individuals limited.

Location:

Areas within a town centre where there already clusters of independent businesses that have organically grown can be beneficial when exploring where to launch a Creative Hub, as this will build the connectivity into the project with existing businesses supporting, engaging and using the facilities.

The case studies featured in this report demonstrate the importance of launching projects to connect with local creatives, building longevity and supporting the wider town centre aspirations and strategy, a shared vision between local authorities, stakeholders and the local community for the growth of creative businesses operating within the town centre.

Size:

Once again the case studies featured show examples of successful smaller high street locations with shop frontage and space from 2,000 sqft to larger scale examples up to 17,000 sqft in the case of Coachworks.

The space requirements of artists/maker studios vary depending on the nature of their business and practice, but the average studio size is anything from 150 to 350 square feet.

What potential levels of income could Maidstone Borough Council expect?

When considering the levels of income that Maidstone Borough Council could expect to achieve, it is vital to first identify if MBC would be the head lessee and then invite a Maidstone Arts Organisation CIC to operate the Creative Hub and pay rent to MBC or if MBC would be managing the Hub and operations directly. There are both models within our case studies and in the case of Made in Ashford the project began as a Council initiative with the intention of working closely with partners to work towards the project being operated by a creative organisation in the future.

Len House costings would obviously correlate with MBC's commitment to square meterage leased, and types of artists encouraged into the project. To create momentum initial support would be beneficial to the program to fill the available space.

What type of business models could be adopted by Maidstone Borough Council?

The traditional business model is to lease a retail unit on either a one year licence or stepped lease agreement of up to 3 years and then enter into a short to medium term agreement with individual creatives to rent a space within the unit. Typically you would ask creative businesses to enter into a minimum agreement of 3 months and then offer a rolling contract giving both parties the option of giving one months notice.

Local Authorities who own an asset within the town centre have also taken on the role of owner and operator and entered into short term agreements with creative businesses.

Pop up Business/incubator

Pop up operators/business incubators could form part of the overall strategy for a Creative Hub in Maidstone whether the council leases the site to an operator or manages from within the local authority.

Popups provide a perfect opportunity to bring something new to the town centre, a test bed for a future aspiration bringing creatives to the town centre, all driving awareness and footfall by offering experiences and products at limited availability.

It is important to identify and work with fledgling businesses who are looking to move to the next level, effectively giving these local creatives/makers or Art organisations the chance to launch and operate with less risk.

As we have seen in many other towns, pop ups can be used to create relationships with potential future creative businesses and help regenerate areas that have a concentration of empty shops. There are many successful examples, giving support to small brands that are discovering new ways to learn about their customers, building loyalty through pop up operations and experimental uses via business incubators.

As we have seen with the launch of Made in Ashford, firstly a pop up shop for 18 months and following the success of this project later became a permanent business in 2015 within a council owned asset. This project was a test bed for the Council and helped to develop and support new creative businesses to the high street with the longer term view of them being confident to take on empty units, this organically created a business network and opportunities.

Emerging creative brands have a clear strategy to develop and collaborate with others creating opportunities. Maidstone Borough Council could capitalise on this to ensure that the overall offer in the town is serving the community, thus future proofing the high street with innovative solutions.

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Retail Inspired has connected with local arts organisations operating within the borough of Maidstone including Maidstone Area Arts Partnership, Maidstone Arts Group and Kent Arts and Wellbeing which has been vital for this feasibility report, as this valuable feedback from the organisations gives an indication of the potential benefits of developing a Creative Arts Hub in the town centre to support the future of creative businesses.

The Maidstone Area Arts Partnership (MAAP) have previously worked on a conceptual project in collaboration with the Maidstone Art Society to consider opening an Arts Hub in a retail unit in Fremlin Walk as a test bed for the wider aspirations of a Creative Arts Hub project. There was much research undertaken to move forward with a 6 week trial and Maidstone Art Society with over 100 members have previously showcased their work in town centre Art Exhibitions within vacant units. Maidstone Arts Society are currently planning their 2023/2024 programme which will include demonstration evenings, practical evenings, Saturday workshops as well as urban sketching and painting days for their members.

There has also been a recent survey undertaken by the Maidstone Arts Group (MAG) amongst its members, which further supports the aspirations of the creative community for a Creative Arts Hub being developed within the town centre.

They surveyed over 100 creatives and received 90 responses from the following questions:

1. Would you support a Creative Arts Hub?

100% of respondents answered yes to this question.

2. What would your Arts Hub Include?

Artist's Studio Space, Music Studio Space, low cost exhibition/gallery space, live music area, café, workshop space.

3. What would you like to see in a Maidstone Arts Hub?

There were many responses and below is a snapshot of the responses:

"An arts space that feels like it is for the community"

"A place where people can meet and exchange ideas – I believe it could bring a variety of the arts together"

"It would be fantastic to have an Arts Hub in Maidstone, providing a vast number of opportunities to creatives, those wanting to learn, a social space for gathering and connecting the Arts and for many who often feel on the fringes of the business and academic world. It would be great to see Maidstone celebrate and support the town and Borough's creative talent and support the learning of the Arts in local schools."

"A creative area with business support for creative businesses"

"I would like to see somewhere artists of all genres could meet and collaborate. An information centre for Maidstone Arts is sadly lacking."

What are the current town centre opportunities available to Maidstone Borough Council? Including the possibility of Len House

The current opportunities available to MBC and for consideration are as follows:

Royal Star Arcade

Royal Star Arcade is an option that would allow MBC to explore a pop-up pilot option in one of the smaller vacant units, with a view to growing into a larger unit within this unique shopping centre before considering taking on a lease for a larger property elsewhere within the town centre. Royal Star Arcade is steeped in history, built in the 16th century, the original Star hotel was an important landmark and coaching inn popular with those travelling between London and Folkestone. In the 19th century the hotel was visited by Queen Victoria and then the Medway Rooms were built in the coach yard. Another interesting historical feature is the Disraeli Balcony where Benjamin Disraeli made his parliamentary acceptance speech. The Royal Star Hotel was converted to an indoor shopping centre in 1989 and today retains many of the original architectural features, establishing a home to many local independent businesses. This would be a good location to consider launching a creative hub.

There are several current vacant opportunities within Royal Star Arcade for MBC to consider:

Unit 42
668 SQFT (1st floor)
£12,000 per annum
£1,000 per calendar month (inclusive of service charge)
Rates exempt
£15.24 per sqft

Unit 35
Ground Floor & 1st floor
972 SQFT
£20,000 per annum (inclusive of service charge)
£20.57 per sqft

Unit 32
1473 SQFT
Ground and first floor
£25,000 per annum (inclusive of service charge)
£16.97 per sqft

Granada House

We have also reviewed current suitable properties in terms of size vacant units within the town centre and 2-4 Granada House located on Lower Stone Street offers space and flexibility with excellent high street frontage.

3,026 sqft
£30,000 per annum, £2,500 per calendar month
Annual service charge £4,060

2-4 Granada House is located within a high footfall area leading to the town centre and high street. It is also adjacent to The Mall shopping centre. This unit was once occupied by Nucleus Arts one of the case studies included within this report and was used as a gallery space for creatives and a commercial coffee shop from the unit which has double frontage, offers the space to create a robust Creative Hub to include a gallery and exhibition space, workshop space, co-working desks area, studios/makers space and café all with excellent shop exposure. A substantial unit of this size would allow MBC to create a hub with many of the requirements detailed within this report and support the aspirations of the local authority.

Other units comparable to the size of Coachworks, one of the case studies within this report, is the former menswear Marks and Spencer store 30-32 Week Street that is currently under offer as of July 2023 and has a total of 19,008 sqft, formerly being marketed at £230,000 per annum with a rateable value of 247,000.

Building to the rear of St Francis Church, Maidstone Town Centre

There is a building in the town centre which is located to the rear of St Francis Church, the property is derelict with outdoor space, but this building is not currently listed as being available. This is a project that potentially MBC property resources could explore further.

Len House

Len House is located in the heart of Maidstone and was built in the 1930's as a purpose built showroom and manufacturing facility for the Rootes Group, famed for the construction of vehicles. In 2020 planning and listed building consent was granted for a mixed use scheme seeing the building being converted into 80 apartments with retail units on the ground floor. To give access to the retail units on the ground floor a new cantilevered walkway is being constructed.

Although this is largely a residential development it is in the heart of the town centre and would offer MBC the flexibility to consider part of the ground floor retail space

as a Creative Arts Hub. Due to the nature of this being residential it would not be possible to accommodate a music venue, but a music/rehearsal space could be sound proofed and give local musicians the opportunity to hire the space. The flexibility of the available space could give MBC the opportunity to configure the optimum square footage for a permanent gallery area, flexible exhibition space and studios for businesses, workshop rooms, co working areas and selling space for creatives.

Cost of works:

Fit out costings are totally dependant upon the unit acquired. A property formerly used as a retail outlet, for example, with existing fixtures and fittings included could be repurposed at little cost. An empty building could be reconfigured with careful budgeting for £10 -£15 per sqft. This figure could rise considerably depending on the structural state of the unit selected and the maintenance terms of the lease.

A budget also has to be considered for legal expenditure and lease negotiations, although this could potentially be delivered in house by the MBC legal team. Additionally, consideration needs to be given to branding of the project, including external signage, window decals, internal presentation and marketing. A budget of £4,000 - £5,000 should be allowed. Again, this could be negated partially with the inclusion of the MBC comms team.

Types of businesses:

A Creative Arts Hubs opening in Maidstone Town Centre would attract an array of businesses from local Kent artists, designer makers, digital businesses including media, marketers, web designers and other creatives.

Facilities:

These are some of the shared spaces and other resources that could be considered and included within a Creative Arts Hub to support tenants and generate the required income for the project:

- Start up/Independent business studios
- Café
- Music room
- Creative Community shared space
- Small theatre/rehearsal space
- Makers selling space with shopfront
- Meeting rooms
- Exhibition space
- Office Studios
- Makers Studios
- Co-working Desks

Makers/Artists Studios:

Providing Makers and Artists Studios within a Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone is vital for helping local artists and makers to develop links with other creatives and fellow studio occupants. The spaces available if developed as part of a connected gallery space would have a positive impact on the Maidstone Arts scene.

In our experience the optimum individual studio size of around 150 sqft is suitable for most mediums, but there are variables with smaller units for digital artists and other uses and with the rent including service charge covering all utilities and repairs, and a minimum of 3 months contract/agreement and one months notice period required. Shared use of kitchen and WC and the ability to book rooms within the hub and exhibit their work within curated exhibitions. Resident Artist studios are on average between £100- £150 per month in Kent.

Potential Income from the hire of exhibition space:

Depending on the size of the exhibition or gallery space there is a potential to generate an income of between £150 and £175 per week, this is based on our extensive research and a space could also be used for other external events or talks and allow this space to be utilised on a daily basis too. Potential income for workshop space would be between £12 and £15 per hour based on what is being charged by other organisations with workshop space either within the gallery or separate spaces/rooms.

You could also consider having two adjoining rooms with the flexibility of using both for an event or two events running concurrently to increase potential income for the Creative Arts Hub.

Makers Collective Retail Outlet:

As documented within this report from the featured case studies, offering a space for makers to sell their wares as part of a creative hub is an opportunity both in terms of developing local creative businesses within the hub and supporting the staffing of the wider hub. This can be achieved by either offering a reduction of studio rent, offsetting against the number of days worked in the retail unit or if a creative business is a stockist without studio space then the amount of commission retained by the hub per transaction can be reduced on a sliding scale from 25% when not working in the hub to 10% when working either 2 days or 4 half days for example.

Typically, a retail area of 1,000 sqft within the overall area could comfortably showcase around 50 makers/artists products each renting a permanent fixed space either on a wall or shelf, all tailored to the product to help showcase their wares. Typically, rental would be £10 per week and then commission on each product of between 25% to as little as 10% if the business is available to work up to 2 days each month.

Business Support:

Creative Hubs offering an element of business support will attract creatives to consider being part of the hub due to the collaborative inclusive nature of the operation, therefore having a clear programme of workshops to support the creative businesses will be beneficial in the long term.

Connecting and partnering with business support organisations and 'The Business Terrace Maidstone' to offer peer to peer support, workshop and networking opportunities will help these creative businesses to develop their offer and flourish within the hub. In our experience Local Authorities offering business support as part of the joining package will give you an advantage over other Creative Hubs and vital for the growth of the businesses. This could be anything from helping to improve their online presence to finance and pitching their product offer to larger retail companies.

Retail Unit within the town centre:

There is also an opportunity for Maidstone Borough Council to consider launching a smaller project as a test bed within a retail unit within the town centre to include a gallery space, retail makers space and workshop opportunities to test the concept of a Creative Arts Hub, connecting with the local Arts Organisations and their members whilst developing the plans to launch in a larger premises such as Len House. This approach will help to build interest in studio spaces, retail space, future exhibitions and so much more, enabling Maidstone Borough Council to develop a clear business case for the project and wider aspirations to support art and culture within the borough.

Consideration of the risks of Maidstone Borough Council undertaking the project of creating a town centre Creative Arts Hub and how these risks could be managed?

The risks involved with launching Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone are as follows:

Depending on the type of model adopted to launch a Creative Arts Hub there must be consideration of:

- Occupancy levels to maintain expected income levels
- A business plan formulated in conjunction with the town centre strategy currently being developed
- A clear pricing structure and procedures for hiring the spaces available
- A competitive pricing structure and model for makers renting space
- Operational considerations including business rates and whether to operate as a CIC with a social purpose
- A streamlined and affordable business model to attract makers and artists and ensuring 100% occupancy levels are maintained
- Consideration of the type of businesses working alongside each other to compliment the hub and encourage collaboration
- Maintaining optimum staffing levels to ensure the Hub is open and managed during normal hours
- Local authority digital strategy and comms plan to promote the project to the local community and nationally

Summary

Local authorities connected with their communities play a vital role in kick starting a renewal of business performance and perception of their town centres, supporting businesses in adapting and creating new opportunities.

Creative organisations play a key role in supporting the regeneration and reimagining of our town centres in a post pandemic world and as we have documented within this report traditional retailing has been on a decline with the increase in online digital retail and changing consumer habits exacerbated by Covid 19 and more recently the cost of living crisis; therefore, a collective response is required to support more diverse and sustainable high streets.

Visitors to Maidstone are generally local and within 20 to 30 minutes away, by road or public transport which makes Maidstone Town Centre an ideal place to consider opening a Creative Arts Hub.

The Creative sector will continue to grow with more people opting to start their own businesses and therefore launching a Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone Town Centre is an opportunity for MBC to work with the existing Arts Groups and their members towards a shared goal that supports Arts and culture in Maidstone, encouraging creative businesses to have a presence in the town centre.

High Streets will continue to evolve to respond to these different uses of space and a Creative Hub in the heart of Maidstone opens up exciting opportunities for local creative businesses, including self employed makers, photographers, artists, musicians and other creatives that want to be part of a collective of creatives and build synergy between themselves and others in the town centre.

The addition of a Creative Arts Hub in Maidstone Town Centre will bring together likeminded businesses, accelerate the recovery of the boroughs creative sector and high street revival post pandemic and support new living and working patterns, bringing increased footfall and dwell time to the town centre. A facility like this will compliment the existing cultural offer and the program of events currently being delivered MBC and other key stakeholders within the town centre.

Appendices

Creative Arts Hubs in Kent:

www.coach-works.co.uk/
m.facebook.com/StGeorgesArtsCentre
www.nucleusarts.com/
www.beachcreative.org/
www.madeinashford.com/

Arts Organisations

maidstonearts.org/
maidstoneartsgroup.co.uk/
www.maidstoneartsociety.com/
kentartsandwellbeing.org.uk/

Len House - civicengineers.com/project/len-house-maidstone/

Royal Star Arcade - royalstararcade.co.uk/

Fremlin Walk Shopping - www.fremlinwalk.co.uk/

The Mall - www.themall.co.uk/maidstone

One Maidstone - www.onemaidstone.com/

Hazlitt Theatre - www.parkwoodtheatres.co.uk/hazlitt-theatre

Maidstone Museum - museum.maidstone.gov.uk/

Rental Properties - www.rightmove.co.uk/commercial-property-to-let/Maidstone.html