



# Sparks Bristol

February 2025

# Case Study Information

<b>Date</b>	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2024
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<b>Organisation</b>	Artspace Lifespace
<b>Place</b>	Sparks Bristol
<b>Version</b>	1

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## Basic Facts about the place

Sparks Bristol is a unique, multi-purpose venue located at 78 Broadmead in the heart of Bristol's shopping district. Occupying the former Marks & Spencer's the 108,000 sq ft former landmark store has been repurposed as an innovation space focuses on sustainability, creativity, and education. It serves as a hub for the community, blending retail with interactive exhibits, workshops, and events.

Sparks Bristol describes itself as the 'Department Store with a Difference' and features departments dedicated to fashion, food, nature, and sustainability, offering recycled goods, repair services, and eco-friendly initiatives. Visitors can explore art installations, enjoy educational programs inspired by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and participate in workshops and pop-up events. The venue also provides affordable studio spaces for artists and event spaces for community use.

## Key opportunities/challenges

There were a few key drivers for the creation of Sparks.

### 1. Safety

The closure of the local M&S store marked a turning point for Broadmead. With the loss of this anchor retailer, the area began to experience a shift in public perception, particularly regarding safety during the evening hours. Street drinkers increasingly gravitated to the area. This change in the social dynamic had a domino effect on nearby businesses, leading to other shop closures. Our flagship building, situated on neighbouring Nelson Street felt the ripple effects of this change as the area became noticeably less welcoming.

### 2. Affordable Creation Space

The building provided the opportunity to support local artists through the provision of affordable space to make, rehearse, showcase and sell their work in the heart of the city. Even though in Bristol there is lots of empty office space, the price of office space has soared. Artists cannot rent affordable studio space, and in general, Bristolians can't afford rent. Yet, buildings are still being snapped up to develop Grade A office space and student accommodation and even artist spaces on the fringes of the city are being lost. 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 in our high streets.

### 3. Culture Declares Emergency & Reaching Audiences

In 2021, it was evident that people were feeling powerless in the face of environmental challenges and frustrated by increased restrictions on protest. We were concerned that this sense of helplessness could lead to individuals believing their efforts will have little impact on the larger issues. We felt Sparks had the opportunity to be a positive space, 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 well-being of the planet and future generations over individual short-term gains.

We have often heard in the arts that audiences are hard to reach but Sparks provided the opportunity through its location, footfall and through blending retail with art and education that we could create a space that represented the diverse community who frequents Broadmead.

Initially, finances were a challenge. We set up Sparks using a £50k Bounce Back loan we got through Covid, with sponsorship to Global Goals Centre funding ground floor activity and an Arts Council England Grant supporting the creation of new art installations and pop up events when we opened.

*Broader challenges that Broadmead is facing:*

The Debenhams store, located on Horsefair on the opposite side of the road to Sparks, closed permanently on May 15, 2021. Approval has been obtained for the store's demolition as part of a redevelopment plan to build a 28-story tower block and other facilities. The Galleries in Bristol also on the opposite side of the road to Sparks is set for a major redevelopment, with plans to demolish the current 1980s shopping centre and replace it with a mixed-use complex. Much of Broadmead is earmarked for development. 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. Many of the identikit shops which took over the high streets are moving to out-of-town retail centres. This is challenging for consumers but 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, if only the city centre building owners could make renting retail units more affordable and accessible.

Antisocial behaviour presents ongoing challenges for the area, particularly affecting its retail and community environment. Key issues include public drug use, vandalism and theft. There is a large transient community in Broadmead. Homeless individuals who once sought shelter in the Bearpit have increasingly moved into Broadmead and the area has seen a rise in rough sleeping, begging, and street drinking. Spice, a synthetic cannabinoid, has become a significant issue among the homeless population in Bristol. We suspect some of the street community are taking nitazenes, a potent synthetic opioids that have recently emerged in the UK and in response to this our arts teams are having training in how to administer Naloxone to help save lives.

**Vision/goals**

Sparks Bristol is creating a vibrant hub that empowers organisations to come together and harness collective imagination to address some of our society's most pressing challenges. By integrating education, art, and culture directly into the high street, this project aims to build a dynamic community of local creatives, makers, and learners. At the heart of the initiative is a commitment to sustainability, with a focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that the work produced here aligns with global efforts to tackle issues such as climate change, inequality, and social resilience.

The project aims to foster collaboration among a wide range of sectors, including arts, education, business, and social innovation, where these diverse stakeholders will work together to find sustainable, locally relevant solutions. A key component of Sparks Bristol

is its dedication to community participation, ensuring that the voices of local residents are heard.

Ultimately, Sparks Bristol aims to serve as a catalyst for positive change, driving social and environmental sustainability. Its impact extends beyond immediate outcomes, with long-term goals that include influencing the future development of Broadmead. By incorporating the principles of sustainability and community-driven innovation into regeneration plans, Sparks Bristol hopes to shape Broadmead into a space that reflects the values of inclusivity, sustainability, and creativity for years to come and to help inspire other cities to 'spark' their own change.

## The team involved in the project/initiative

### Project/initiative team

#### **Hammond Associates – Initial Lease Negotiation**

Nick Smith – Hammond Associates

Paul Hammond – Hammond Associates

#### **Artspace Lifespace – Co-Founders and Building Managers**

Kathryn Chiswell Jones – Artspace Lifespace CEO

John Hosken – Sparks Bristol Venue Manager

Kara de los Reyes – Artspace Lifespace Trustee

Doug Francis – Artspace Lifespace / The Invisible Circus

#### **Global Goals Centre – Co-Founders and Sustainability Education Managers**

Jenny Foster – Global Goals Centre Director

Steve Roser – Global Goals Centre Trustee

Mark Jacobs – Global Goals Centre Creative Director

#### **HTC – Landlords Agents**

Alan Wright – HTC

#### **The Invisible Circus – Set Design**

Danni Sweetland – The Invisible Circus

#### **Bristol City Council – connecting the partners Artspace Lifespace and Global Goals Centre**

Jason Thorne



**Visioning Exercise:**

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, Materials in Mind, Pervasive Media Studio - Watershed, POD, PRSC, Repair Cafe, Sustainable Hive, Sustrans, University of Bristol, YesIDub Creations, WECA, Individual artists.

**Probono Support**

Arup, Hydrock, Gleeds, Burges Salmon, Womble Bond Dickinson

**Furniture Donations**

CollectEco

**Artspace Sparks Funders**

Arts Council England  
Bristol + Bath Creative R&D  
Arts Funding & Philanthropy  
Bristol City Council Vacant Commercial Property Fund

**Impact or outcomes**

**Short-term outcomes/impact**

**May 2023-May 24:**

No of Visits: 540,394  
11987 items saved from Landfill  
2800 individuals (mainly children) reached through education workshops from Global Goals Centre, Institute of Civil Engineers, Aardman, Re-Fuse, Bristol Zoo and Rethrindle  
Equivalent of 601 volunteer days (based on 6.5 working hours)

**June 2024-Dec 2024**

No of Visits: 295,311  
6416 items saved from landfill  
Education Workshops: 506 children reached (Global Goals Centre  
Equivalent of 80 volunteer days (based on 6.5 working hours)

No of Events at Sparks in calendar year 2024 = 78 (Not including Global Goals Centre Education Workshops, Repair Workshops or Rethrindle Workshops)  
 (approx. 105 in total when these included)

In calendar Year 2024 we supported the following numbers		
Artist Desk Space	26	
Artists Taking up Studio Space	72	(includes 40 for Tabb hubb)
Traders	33	

Current No of Artist Studios now: 15 Traders: 27 (Total number traders and makers supported by selling at Sparks = 277)

Awards	Category	Status
Festival of Place Pineapple Awards 2024	Activation - Community Space	Winner
Bristol Social Impact Awards 2024	The Environmental Award	Winner
Bristol Social Impact Awards 2024	New Innovation	Runner-up
Bristol Life Awards 2024	Sustainability	Runner-up
Bristol Life Awards 2024	New Business	Runner-up
<u>Okayama International Award for Sustainability Education for Sparks Bristol</u>	Sustainability Education	Winner
Bristol Bath & Somerset Tourism Awards 2024/2025	New Tourism Business of the Year	Silver

Feedback

"On behalf of the whole team I want to thank you and the whole team for being such warm and generous hosts during our time at Sparks - seeing the space evolve over the last year has been a joy to see, and we've really enjoyed working alongside such a friendly, dedicated and creative group of people. Although the time is right for us to move on as our team and our needs from an office space grow, we look forward to returning in the future as visitors / hirers / collaborators." Vicki Woolley – Head of Operations, Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership

Josie Hanson, Shelter - Housing emergency display in Sparks during June-July 2024 "Our presence on Saturdays was the most fruitful, as we engaged in some positive conversations. People appeared to have engaged in the ball exercise of choosing a top priority for the next government even in our absence, which was to make renting privately more affordable, we did not necessarily get the best engagement via our QR codes available to complete our survey however, this is not entirely surprising as we were not always there to promote this and support those engaged to complete it as much as we would have liked. Overall, we found the space positive and worthwhile. The staff were incredibly helpful and accommodating when we were in attendance and for set up and takedown. In addition, it was affordable and helped us raise awareness of the housing emergency locally and nationally."

"It was absolutely brilliant, probably one of my favourite community businesses I've ever visited" - Laura Potter, Communications Consultant with Power to Change

"I spoke to the elderly couple who didn't know how to operate the listening table; they told me that they originally didn't want to come in because they miss M&S, but they recognize that SPARKS is more modern I explained what we are trying to do here and they were both positively surprised. One of them enjoys arts and crafts and expressed interest in getting involved in our workshop. Ben had a positive interaction with a child who was responsive to Ben's creative prompts which led them to engage in an imaginative game around the front floor. We got someone in who was looking for a loud t-shirt, he found it and was happy to get it from Sparks. "

Feedback recorded by one of our 'Sparklers' March 23, 2024

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

"I normally hate the centre of town but I'll have to come back now".

Take a [VIRTUAL TOUR](#) - created by Materials in Mind

Read [A NEW VISION FOR CITY CENTRES](#) - Lessons from the Sparks Project, an interim evaluation report about Sparks Bristol March/ April 2024 Produced at UWE Bristol by Elahe Karimnia (School of Architecture & Environment) and Tarek Virani (School of Arts



**Long-term outcomes/achievements**

We believe initiatives like SPARKS make tangible strides in promoting cooperation and driving tangible improvements in local high streets. They help people who normally may not feel arts and culture is for them. It is by embedding the project through experiences in the store which have helped influence the City Centre Development Plan by providing a hopeful, and inspiring vision of what 21st Century Retail and high streets could look like. Here are some of the tours and talks we have given to help ‘Spark’ change, locally, nationally and internationally.

2023

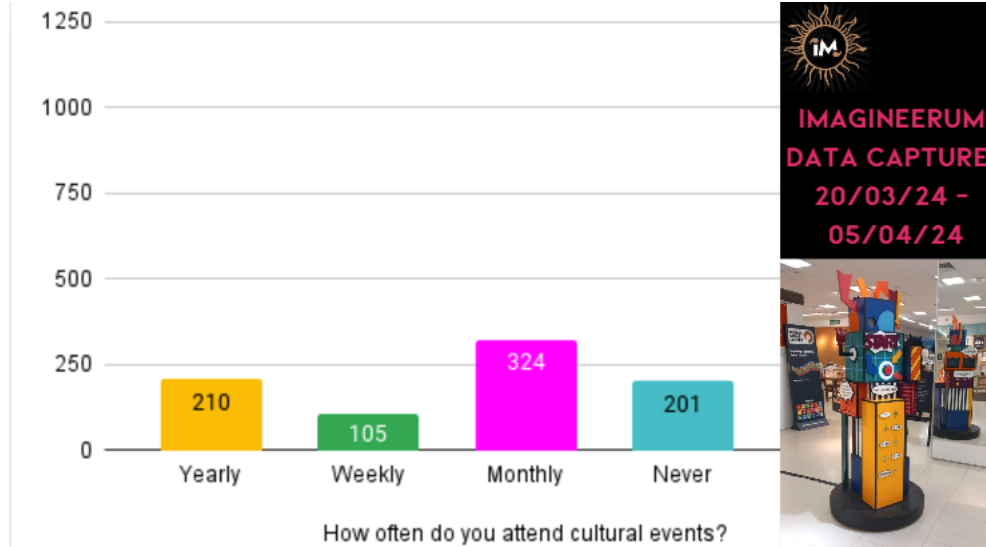
<b>Name of Organisation</b>	<b>Name of Tour / Talks</b>	<b>Date of Tour / feedback</b>
Exeter University	Exeter University Tour & Talk	December 2023
Torbay Council	Tour and talk with view to setting up similar in Torbay LizMuir@torbaycdt.org.uk	February 2024
Bristol Civic Society	Bristol Civic Society Tour & Talk (2 hours)	March 2024
Gambling Commission CEO and team	Gambling Commission CEO and team Tour & Talk	April 2024
National Trust	National Trust Tour & Talk	April 2024
European Commission	European Commission Tour & Talks	May 2024
Institute of Place Management	Demolish, re-purpose, re-let?: What’s your place doing with its vacant shopping centre and department store spaces?	May 2023
M10 Culture & Creative Industries Leads Group	M10 Culture & Creative Industries Leads Group Tour & Talk	May 2023
SPARKS and UNESCO Creative Cities Evaluation Case Study stakeholder session	SPARKS and UNESCO Creative Cities Evaluation Case Study stakeholder session	June 2023
North Somerset Council	Weston Placemaking Zoom Consultancy - North Somerset Council	June 2023
South Gloucestershire Council	High Street Co-ordinator - Regeneration Team for South Gloucestershire Council	June 2023
Island Artist Studio Holders	Island Artist Studio Holders	June 2023
Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) Tour	Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) Tour	June 2023
Sunderland Bid - Empty Units Discussion	Empty Units Discussion - Zoom Consultancy	Oct 2023

Sparking Change - Public Tours & Talks	Sparking Change - Public Tours & Talks x 4	Oct - Dec 2023
Developer Magazine	Developer Magazine Podcast	Jan 2024
Scottish Cities Alliance	Sparking Change - Public Tours & Tour & Talk	March 2024
Uni of Gloucester	Cultural regeneration of the high street, including 'meanwhile' use of buildings and public spaces organised by Daniel Keech, Uni of Gloucester (funded by ACE)	May 2023
Pineapples Awards	Presentation via Airmeet	Apr 2024
Bristol Beacon	Bristol Beacon Tour& Talk (Island & Sparks Bristol)	May 2024
National trust	National Trust Tour and Talk	May 2024

2024

<b>Name of Organisation</b>	<b>Name of Tour / Talks</b>	<b>Date of Tour</b>
Power to Change	Tour & Talk	June 2024
Newport Circular Economy Network	Tour & Talk	June 2024
Triodos Green Team	Tour & Talk	June 2024
Ethical Property Company	Tour & Talk	Sept 2024
Friends of Bristol Museums	Tour & Talk	Sept 2024
Baroness Barbara Janke with Stephen Hilton and James Martin	Tour	Sept 2024
Good Urbanism Judging Panel	Tour	Sept 2024
Swindon Council	Tour	Nov 2024
Yeovil Art Space Sparks Tour & Q&A	Tour	Nov 2024
Resource Futures	Talk	Nov 2024

Visual



Imagineerium Pilot Project to capture visitor data. One of the data capture questions was trying to find out how many of our visitors would not normally visit an art exhibition or sustainability centre.



Sparks Bristol 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary May 2024

## Advice for members and the wider placemaking community

### Advice/key learning

#### **Highs and lows experienced during the process of developing this initiative**

- Highs – the partnerships, the people, the creativity
- Lows – the building (lots of building issues), the uncertainty (meanwhile lease), Burnout (staff and individuals involved)

**Timeframe involved – Initial Lease from Dec 2022-Dec 2023, Opened May 2023, Lease extended to 2024 and then 2025.**

#### **Funds required**

- Start up costs £50k
- Build costs £33k
- Art Programming costs £55k
- Plus Partner Charities Operational Costs (funded by National Lottery)
- This was a shoestring budget for a massive project. Very difficult to get capital funding when you don't have a long lease.

#### **Relationships and contributions the initiative required from key stakeholders**

The main managers of the project are Artspace Lifespace and Global Goals Centre who together created shared vision, values and direction for Sparks.

#### **If the same initiative were to be implemented again elsewhere, what would you do differently?**

Hindsight is a wonderful thing and many decisions were made on the only options available to us but in hindsight I would:

- Try to negotiate a longer lease from the outset.

- Get a more indepth survey using our own consultants rather than relying on the landlords and agents.
- Ensure the designers are working from a clear design brief.
- Employ more staff at the outset to prevent burnout and illness

**What is the main ‘takeaway’ you want people to learn from your experience**

Collaborate with Others using a shared vision and manifesto to guide you. Leave individualism at the door to work together.

## Contact for case study queries

<b>Name</b>	Kathryn Chiswell Jones
<b>Position</b>	CEO
<b>Organisation</b>	Artspace Lifespcae
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Please provide details for a relevant point of contact that can assist with any queries from the IPM team during the publication process and subsequently. We may need to clarify some aspects of your submission or seek further information or visuals.. The contact details you provide will not be shared externally and will be retained securely by the Institute of Place Management, based at Manchester Metropolitan University (acting as Data Controller).

## Further details

**Further details**

- <https://sparksbristol.co.uk/>
- <https://artspace.uk/>