

# ADEPT President's Awards 2025

Entry form

**Main contact name** Becky Welford

**Email** rebecca\_welford@bathnes.gov.uk

**Phone Number** (07815) 641090

**Award category** Shaping Places for People

**Project Title** Vacant Unit Action Project

**Local authority entrant** Bath and North East Somerset Council

## Headline summary (150 characters max.)

This project transforms vacant spaces into a mix of new uses, including retail pop-ups, creative workshops, art studios, and community activities.

**Please note we need at least one supporting image per award submission. Upload your image/s below.**











**Video - please paste links to any video evidence here. (Leave blank if not relevant.)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhqPts\\_Z\\_qY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhqPts_Z_qY)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY\\_fFjzJGt8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY_fFjzJGt8)

**Shaping places for people: How was this project an innovative response to a significant concern? (150 words max.)**

The Vacant Unit Action Project (VUAP) was created in direct response to the decline of the high street following the Covid pandemic.

To mitigate against the accumulative social and economic impact of increasing vacancy rates across the district, the interventions of this project were intended to stimulate the local economy, support local businesses and creatives, and to diversify high streets with a mix of new commercial and community focussed initiatives. There was also as an opportunity to enrich the provision of arts and cultural activities across the region.

This project offered a sustainable response to the growing need to re-use existing buildings, coupled with the ever-increasing rents that are often unaffordable to community organisations, creatives, and small businesses.

The council utilised grant funding to make vacant units operationally compliant and economically viable, and facilitate public-private-third sector partnerships to bring more diverse uses into vacant properties.

**Shaping places for people: Please give evidence of the quality of outcomes obtained from the project (for example improved/more efficient services, increased inclusivity for residents, futureproofing the service). (150 words max.)**

As well as supporting pop-ups, window installations and temporary meanwhile uses, VUAP has funded capital improvements to vacant units that have led to long term occupancy including a community arts centre, a community café and a central pop-up retail store.

The Old Print Works Arts in Radstock is a flexible and inclusive creative space that delivers affordable artist residencies and a programme for 16-25s not in education, employment and training, which has helped an estimated 65 people back into work within 2 years. It has also welcomed over 2,000 local residents in it's first year of opening to participate in free creative activities.

The initial financial injection from VUAP has enabled community and arts organisations to occupy vacant spaces at low cost so that they can build up a presence within the community, generating further income opportunities to be able to support themselves financially in the longer term.

**Shaping places for people: Please give evidence of the level of collaboration between place and people services (both within the council and with external partners/providers). (150 words max.)**

For the window animations the council engaged with various artists, set designers and festival organisers to create visual and artistic content supporting local creative talent.

To deliver pop-up events, we engaged with community organisations, creatives, and charities to link up the emerging demand for space with available vacant units. Some of our partners in BaNES include Share & Repair, Climate Hub, Bath Carnival, Fringe Arts Bath, Little Lost Robot, Bath Spa University, Midsomer Norton Community Trust, and Keynsham Town Council.

The refurbishment works to the vacant units involved extensive collaboration with multiple stakeholders including landlords, community trusts, local councils and local businesses.

The project established new ways of working across BaNES council teams, by breaking down historic silos and demonstrating what could be achieved by internal teams sharing information and resources to support the local community.

**Shaping places for people: Please give evidence of the level of buy-in to the project or its goals from members of the local community, health and social care and external organisations. (150 words max.)**

The success of this project is evident through it's extension from an initial 2-year scheme in 2020 through to it's 5th year of delivery, backed by ongoing grant funding from WECA.

VUAP has supported over 70 pop-ups for local retailers, charities, and creatives. This has led to the provision of a dedicated pop-up space at Studio 22 in central Bath, which continues to be in high demand and already fully booked for 2025.

Several units that have been vacant long term have received fresh commercial interest once they have been visually transformed and occupied through meanwhile uses.

Little Lost Robot, a creative arts organisation, tested their activities in a smaller space initially, leading to a more ambitious project at a larger premises. They are now exploring options for community ownership, demonstrating that VUAP can create a platform for organisations to expand their provision and create a foothold within their community.

**Shaping places for people: Please give evidence of the use or consideration of new sources of investment to fund projects. (150 words max.)**

The VUAP project has utilised a mixed funding model with external grant funding from the UK government e.g UKSPF, covid-19 grants, Historic England high street grants, utility company warm spaces grants, grant funding from the Mayoral Combined Authority alongside private sector match funding from landlords, charity sector and university match funding from tenants and council capital funding from service supported borrowing. Various payback mechanisms including spend to generate future rental income and cross-subsidy e.g. retail pop-ups cross subsidise charity fundraiser pop-ups have also been trialled with success.

**All categories: please add anything else that supports your award entry**

The Vacant Unit Action Project is now within it's third phase, involving a large capital project to retrofit two long standing commercial units into a mix of new uses on Keynsham High Street. The success of this project is evident through the economic and social impacts it is having on our high streets and within local communities. We believe this is a model that can be replicated across councils and we have already provided guidance to South Gloucestershire Council's Regeneration Team on their own Vacant Unit Project. The recognition of this project through the Adept Awards will demonstrate to other councils the significant value of investing in vacant and under-utilised spaces.