

# THE OLD POST OFFICE (TOPO)



**Proposals by the Kingston community  
for community use**

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**TOPO** is a consortium of local community groups and organisations working together to establish a sustainable community-cultural hub in central Kingston hosting a number of social, creative and environmental enterprises. Our first choice of space is The Old Post Office listed building(s) on Eden Street, hence TOPO.

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"Hedonistic Sustainability – the idea that sustainability is not a burden, but that a sustainable city in fact can improve our quality of life."  
*Architect Bjarke Ingels on TEDxEast*  
(<http://tinyurl.com/o35uczx>)



"It is almost a law of nature that the infrastructure of the industry of the past gets reinvented as the framework for the culture and leisure of the present, and maybe the next revolution is that instead of doing it retroactively we can start doing it proactively."  
*Architect Bjarke Ingels on the future of cities in "The Strand", BBC World Service*  
(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p014hl1j>)



### 2014 edition

**Note:** There is a fuller and occasionally updated version of this Prospectus, with end-notes and references, appendixes, site plans, and more history and examples, at <http://e-voice.org.uk/topo>.

*With thanks to the Royal Borough of Kingston for a grant that enabled the printing of this Prospectus*

## 1. SUMMARY

### What the TOPO consortium is proposing and offering

- A well worked out and attractive plan for community gain from a possible future development in central Kingston
- A central Kingston community cultural hub, offering a unique local venue for creative, social and environmental enterprises
- An imaginative addition to Kingston's developing cultural quarter, useful to the town centre, the wider community and the Council in its sustainability objectives and its intention to become a destination of choice (see pages 5-6)
- Events and activities that would widen the cultural capital and offer in Kingston, and a welcoming meeting space opening into the evening, thus increasing dwell time as well as diversity in the town centre and evening economy (see pages 5-6)
- Sustainable, creative and productive use and conservation of a neglected Grade-2-listed local landmark, built in 1875 (see pages 5-6)
- Wide community engagement and support for a venue that would enhance central Kingston (see pages 4, 11)
- A venue that intends to pay its way (see pages 9-10 and on-line edition)
- A space that actively facilitates, supports and mentors – in employability, skills enhancement, innovation and entrepreneurship

### The current social and economic context

- The recession short-term, on-line shopping long-term, and competition from out-of-town shopping centres are all taking their toll on the retail sector. Most observers now recognise that retail expansion cannot go on for ever, may not be a sustainable basis for local economies, and tends to produce "clone towns" and low-paid, insecure jobs.
- The consensus seems to be that in future there should be less dependence in town centres on shopping, and more stress on other local employment opportunities, creativity, diversity, social spaces, entertainment, the arts and culture.
- Every town centre, including Kingston, needs and wants to build on and promote its own distinctive character, townscape, history and local culture - and needs a "Unique Selling Proposition" if people are to continue to visit, shop, and spend leisure time there. Community groups may be better placed than businesses or local councils to deliver that distinctiveness.
- Kingston has a successful shopping centre and vibrant night life, but the TOPO proposal offers an opportunity to become known for more than consumerism and clubbing.
- Kingston has an attractive compact medieval street plan, historic market places, some ancient buildings, and a pleasant riverside, but it has lost much of its heritage and some characterful buildings over the years. The Grade-2-listed former post office buildings have now been empty and neglected for a decade and at least one of them is now on the English Heritage "At Risk" register.
- Cross-rail will not help Kingston at all, and transport is generally a problem (no underground connection, too many cars), though bus connections into the town centre are very good and provision for cyclists improving. The increasing need for access by public and sustainable transport and "walkability" will tend to favour town centre venues.
- There is a chronic lack of affordable space in Kingston for the voluntary sector and for the next generation of creative businesses at a time when these sectors are likely to grow.

### What, and who, is TOPO?

TOPO is a consortium of community groups and organisations (see page 11 for more about the consortium and its story) interested in developing and running the neglected Old Post Office on Eden Street – or, failing that, another central Kingston space – as a community hub. It would be a typical "Asset Based Community Development", for which there is a world-wide knowledge base.

The consortium began with the following supporters, some of whom are members of the TOPO steering group and sub-groups that produced parts of this prospectus: ■ Creative Youth ■ Fusion Arts ■ Greener Kingston ■ Kingston Eco-op ■ Kingston Environment Centre ■ Kingston Environment Forum ■ Kingston Fairtrade Group ■ Kingston Green Radio ■ Recovery Initiative Social Enterprise ■ Save the World Club ■ Transition Town Kingston...



## 2. RESPONSES TO "HAVE YOUR SAY!"

"What a great project! The main thing that young theatre makers need is space that is big enough and warm enough to work in. Space that doesn't have a precious, expensive floor or restrictions on its use. As a theatre maker, you want a room that you can stick things on the wall with Bluetack, that you can throw things on the floor (and clear up!). It needs to be an empty, useable space. To be honest, my favourite rehearsal rooms are the ones that are a bit shabby."

"I think using the post office as a multi-arts space would further cement that Kingston really is an up and coming place to test new work, to trial new ideas and to play with innovations in art and performance. Particularly for young people, there needs to be a space between the process and the finished product where it's OK to try and OK to discuss and I think this would have a really positive effect on the community. It would start to forge ideas of open creative discussion across all different kinds of arts."

"I think it has the possibility to become all the things mentioned and most importantly to create employment and training opportunities leading to paid work for the many currently excluded from economic independence."

"I really think the building if taken over by the community should have a focus on innovation, entrepreneurship and start-up businesses. At a time when young people are really struggling with employment, it is those with the ability to turn ideas into reality with creativity that will succeed."

"Rather than building a new multi-arts space, it would good to re-use and re-new an older space where the history and roots of the building itself become an attraction too. For me, the perfect case study of how this can be done really well is at the Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in Clapham. This building is the old Town Hall and parts of the building date back to 1893. This is one of the best examples I can think of a multi-arts space that is respectful of the charm and history of the building but is incredibly innovative in its approach to the arts."

"I believe the old post office can be the heart of the community with multiple groups residing there which would create an atmosphere of collaboration and creativity. Spaces and places become alive and organisations shine when we work together, push each other, learn from each other – I think its especially important the dynamic is created with lots of different sectors residing together so that there is a collaborative, positive exchange between sectors such as the arts, environment, social support, innovation and entrepreneurship."

"I believe that the Old Post Office could be a brilliant and vital space for my company and others like mine. It could act as a much needed base for us, as an office space and/or a performance space. A room could be turned into a small venue for us to showcase the young performers that we work with both locally and from further afield. When not in use as a performance space, it could act as a rehearsal space for young local musicians and performers."

"The local community would benefit most obviously from the increase in cultural activity in the centre of town and with many more performance, exhibitions and installations to go and see. Perhaps we could introduce something where the studios and spaces are open 3 out of the 7 days a week and the general public can go in to the Post Office, grab a coffee and then have a wander through the studios and see what is going on."

### 3. THE TOPO PROPOSAL

#### The various community groups and enterprises involved propose:

- A permanent and visible base for a public-facing and economically sustainable Kingston Environment Centre, bringing resources, information, education and training on environmental issues into the town centre and mainstream, where they need to be to deliver the borough's sustainability objectives
- Attractive and sociable meeting and drop-in space(s), with wi-fi and quiet area(s) where minority groups, young people under age for pubs, community groups, campaign groups, local charities and advice and support groups, clubs and societies, could meet and interact with the public and each other, and small and start-up businesses could meet each other and their clients\*
- Affordable, flexible spaces for regular or "pop-up" shops, classes, workshops, exhibitions and events\*
- An organic-vegetarian café that would be the heart of this community hub and which could specialise in local food and Fairtrade where practicable, and stay open in the early evening. Ideally it would be licensed, could be hired out for private and community events, and the kitchen would be large enough for occasional cookery courses and demonstrations\*



*A visualisation of the café at the heart of this community/ arts/ environmental hub, by Alex Dean*

- Affordable work and office spaces or hot-desks, with storage and wi-fi, for small businesses, sole traders, start-up enterprises, local charities and support groups...\*
- Affordable art and craft studios or workshops, and space to exhibit and/or sell\* – providing new local opportunities for creative industries, local artists, art students and art graduates, and increasing Kingston's cultural capital
- Shared storage space and other facilities for a range of enterprises
- Affordable larger multi-purpose meeting room(s) for rehearsal and performance space, public meetings, film shows, exhibitions... to satisfy local demand for mid-size venues and events, and for secular spaces where people of all faiths and none can feel comfortable\*
- Conservation and sustainable use of local landmark, heritage buildings, Grade-2-listed and at risk according to English Heritage, rather than continued neglect and disuse and, perhaps eventual demolition – with displays about the history of the building and as part of the development, and the building(s) demonstrating how to retrofit old or historic buildings and adapt them to contemporary uses and needs
- As part of the larger development of the site, a piazza or "pocket park" with access from adjoining streets to draw the public in and provide a pleasant outdoor recreational space, which could be planted and maintained by Kingston Environment Centre as a model sustainable garden

Many of the above could offer employment or training or work experience opportunities for local people. Most of them would benefit from co-location and cross-fertilisation (something that the highly successful Google calls "serendipitous interaction").

\* These would generate income (see section 5 or website)

**Benefits to Kingston of a vibrant and mixed-use community hub could include:**

- A creative contribution towards a more attractive and welcoming town centre
- A community attraction that would fit well in the proposed redevelopment of the Eden Quarter
- Positive impacts on local tourism and culture
- A more diverse daytime and evening culture – and more and different footfall
- A public-facing informal space for delivery of health, environmental, cultural and other Council and community messages and support, as well as increased visibility for some voluntary sector services
- A sociable and sustainable community hub taking advantage of the synergies between the arts (visual and performance), crafts, leisure and work spaces, and environmental concerns; it would be different from, but complementary to, other proposed central Kingston "community hubs" and venues, most of which have their own distinctive functions and ethos (e.g., some are religious, others commercial, few are as diverse and mixed-use as the TOPO proposal)
- Employment/self-employment/apprenticeship/mentoring opportunities



**Left and right:** Reclaimed and refurbished chairs and tables, as in this canal-side café-bar and the Rose Theatre café, can provide attractive and inexpensive furniture, in keeping with a sustainable ethos, as well as employment and skill-sharing opportunities.



**Left and right:** skill-sharing at Kingston Environment Centre



**Our "Big Ask":**

- The former main Post Office and/or Sorting Office buildings restored to a sound, habitable state, with all utilities and services fit for purpose and in good working order
- The buildings transferred to the TOPO consortium on a long lease for a peppercorn rent, as planning gain, to enable management by and for the local community, with an emphasis on affordability for all

#### 4. INSPIRATIONS and MODELS

*The enthusiasm and creativity of our team and participants in our open meetings (and Vital Kingston's before those), provided most of our ideas, and the centre we are proposing will no doubt be a unique building and venue based on a unique collaboration. But we have also visited and observed other communities and venues that have achieved similar ends to ours, to the benefit of their villages, towns and cities and often without recourse to public funding, also our aspiration. Other communities have created and supported similar enterprises – why shouldn't we?*

“The most vibrant town centres offer a wide range of locally responsive services that create a comprehensive retail, cultural and community hub. This is crucial for the future of the High Street as it is an offer that its competitors struggle to match. Future Government policy must acknowledge this, not treating retail in isolation, but empowering councils to integrate the shopping offer effectively alongside other cultural and community services.”

*Local Government Association response to The Portas Review*

##### **ArtsBank, Saltburn**

<http://www.artsbank.co.uk/>

A substantial Victorian property, the old HSBC bank, (*pictured right*) in the heart of Saltburn-by-the-Sea, has been converted by a privately funded initiative into a gallery and arts centre, which aims "to involve people from all backgrounds in the cultural life of the region, and to raise the cultural profile of an often-neglected area...to inspire new creative work... especially from the young... Classes and workshops will be run, developing ArtsBank's association with schools, colleges, community groups and national organisations..."



##### **The Avenue Halls, Kew**

<http://www.avenuehalls.com>

This former church (*pictured left*) is owned and run by the Kew Community Trust, an independent trust and registered charity. Hire fees for events, parties, meetings, classes... contribute directly to the running and upkeep of The Avenue Club, a social club for the whole community, but especially for the elderly.

##### **Battersea Arts Centre**

<https://www.bac.org.uk>

The former Battersea Town Hall, built in 1893 (*pictured right*), was threatened with demolition and a local campaign was formed to save the building, resulting in a Grade 2 listing in 1970. In 1979 the building was saved from closure again and became an independent Arts Centre, which includes a café-bar, spaces for hire and a play-space, as well as hosting pioneering theatre productions.



##### **Geall Gallery and Artisan Café, North Yorkshire**

<http://www.chrisgeall.com>

A small privately-run café and gallery (*interior pictured left*) in a tourist village, selling the usual refreshments, plus paintings, pottery and other local crafts, with an artist's studio at one end.

### Kingston Environment Centre

<http://kingstoneco.org.uk>

From 2008 to early 2013, Kingston Environment Centre (now based in New Malden) acted as caretaker-tenant of the former Fairfield Nursery on Fairfield East, designated for redevelopment as a new Quaker Meeting House. While there they created a permaculture garden (*pictured right*), hosted events and meetings, acted as a source of environmental information, and offered space for skill-sharing, courses, community groups and social enterprises.



### Landmark Centre, Teddington

<http://landmarkartscentre.org>

Just across the river from Kingston, this redundant church (*pictured left*) was rescued after a passionate campaign by local people and others interested in preserving Victorian architecture. It has become an independent charity that receives no statutory funding towards core operating costs, supported by ticket and drink sales, classes, donations and legacies, events, and volunteers.

### Living Green Centre, Morden Hall Park

<http://www.sustainablemerton.org/projects.htm#LGC>

A new environmental centre and community outreach project based in the UK's most energy-efficient historic building, an old stable block in the park (*pictured right*), owned by the National Trust. It includes a café, exhibition space, offices and craft workshops. Sustainable Merton hosts drop-in advice sessions on sustainability.



### Matthews Yard, Croydon

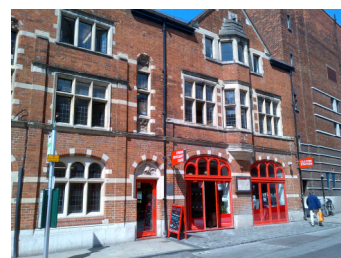
<http://www.matthewsyard.com>

Run as a business on the site of Croydon's first brewery and a former jail-house, it was conceived after the 2011 riots as a space that "was truly for everyone - for gigs, book groups, meetings or just to relax and read the Sunday papers". It comprises a coffee shop and canteen, a lounge, low cost co-working space, and a 70-seat theatre/performance space/ art gallery/ live music venue (*pictured left*).

### Old Fire Station , Oxford

<http://www.oldfirestation.org.uk/about-us/>

Reopened in 2011 as an arts centre run by charity and social enterprise Arts at the Old Fire Station (*pictured right*), including a shop, gallery, theatre, studios and café, as well as a centre for training homeless people run by Crisis Skylight Oxford.



### Sumac Centre Nottingham

<http://www.veggies.org.uk/sumac/welcome.html>

A large terrace house (*pictured left*) was bought in 2001 by a co-operative to provide a social venue and resource centre for everyone concerned with global issues, animals, people and the environment, with library, internet access, club/function room, gardens and vegan community café, which now manages the premises. Rent from two upstairs flats helps to finance the centre.

Find more examples from around the UK in our on-line edition at <http://e-voice.org.uk/topo>.



## 5. BUSINESS / FUNDING / GOVERNANCE

The Grade-2-listed Old Post Office buildings will not be cheap or easy buildings to equip, maintain and manage, but we have had enough enthusiastic *Expressions of Interest* (listed below, details in the on-line version of this Prospectus) to give us confidence that there are, and will be for the foreseeable future, enterprises and organisations keen to use and pay for a community space in central Kingston, and that this could be as popular and financially sustainable as other similar venues (see Section 4).

The venue will differ from most commercial venues for arts and community activities in that it is intended to encourage users from a wide range of backgrounds, some of whom, like young artists, will be on low incomes. Therefore a range of funding options as well as private self-funding is being considered, to allow for affordable participation across the community.

### 1. Feasibility and capital funding requirements

We anticipate that we will need one-off funding for:

- Start-up / organisational costs (Steering Committee)
- An options analysis by a qualified consultant
- A feasibility study by a qualified consultant with input from building professionals
- Unless owner / landlord pays, capital funding for repair and restoration of the building respecting its listed status (to be costed in feasibility study)
- Interior decoration, fitting out, office equipment and furniture, wi-fi etc (to be costed in feasibility study)

**2. Operating budget notes:** our estimates of expenditure and income remain incomplete of necessity until we have more information about the space available and a time-frame. Some occasionally updated estimates can be found in our on-line edition.

#### 2.1 Expenditure categories:

- Rent – payable to landlord in accordance with lease
- Business rates – to be negotiated with RBK
- Utilities – to be paid by the facilities management (FM) company against income from sublets, etc.
- Insurances etc – to be paid by the FM company against income from sublets, etc
- Maintenance of building and common parts, interior redecoration etc – to be paid by the FM company against income from sublets, etc.
- Café/restaurant and Eco-op etc to look after own cleaning and decoration

**2.2 Rental income:** we envisage rental and hire charges having the potential to be affordable while meeting running costs. Our estimates include use of all or some of the buildings on the site by many of the enterprises that expressed interest in the project in 2012-13, or similar future enterprises (see on-line edition for details and space required):

- |                                         |                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| ▪ Project Green Room                    | ▪ Stitch in Time workshops                              |
| ▪ Recovery Initiative Social Enterprise | ▪ Creative Youth rehearsals                             |
| ▪ Kingston Environment Centre           | ▪ Community group exhibitions                           |
| ▪ Green Radio                           | ▪ Circus Suburbia classes                               |
| ▪ Anagio Ltd Web Design                 | ▪ Moonlight Theatre Company rehearsals and workshops    |
| ▪ Creative Youth                        | ▪ Kingston Artists Open Studios                         |
| ▪ Community Film Unit                   | ▪ Social enterprise café/youth training café-bar        |
| ▪ Work Free                             | ▪ Pop-up supper clubs                                   |
| ▪ Euphonix community choir rehearsals   | ▪ Cookery classes                                       |
| ▪ Recovery Initiative Social Enterprise | ▪ WOW Vintage Art & Craft                               |
| ▪ Yoga classes                          | ▪ Fusion Arts, and other local artists and craftspeople |
| ▪ Community singing sessions            | ▪ Save the World Club                                   |
| ▪ Dance classes                         | ▪ Kingston Eco-op                                       |
| ▪ From the Ground Up veg collection     |                                                         |
| ▪ Transition Town Kingston events       |                                                         |
| ▪ Kingston Environment Centre           |                                                         |

## 2.3 Potential additional income from sale of goods/services/commission, could include:

- Weekend crèche 11am-4pm, Saturday and Sunday (charged per hour)
- Commission on sale of artworks on Sale or Return, 10%
- Branded merchandise, cards etc from café shop
- Occasional pop-up shops, markets, trade stalls, enterprises

### Some imaginative income ideas

*A café can display art and be furnished with renovated antiques, all of which are for sale.*

Coming this Autumn/ Winter

**The Artisan Café  
Secret Supper Club**

@ The Geall Gallery Grosmont

What is a Supper Club?

It is a different dining experience more like a dinner party than restaurant style dining, based in a relaxed art gallery setting.

What to expect!

Maximum of 12 diners; advance booking essential; everyone sits together to enjoy good home-cooked food, seasonal and organic where possible in a relaxed friendly atmosphere. There will be a complimentary glass of fizz or a cocktail to welcome you. We're not licenced, so diners need to bring their own booze; so bring plenty!

The menu is a set one but special dietary requirements can be catered for with advance notice.

Ticket Price is £25 per head

Enquires & Booking please ring:  
01947 895007 or 01947 810820

Email: jayne.harrison03@gmail.com

Visit our Artisan facebook page



*Pop-up supper clubs*

## 3. Free services: subsidies/full cost funding from the income streams listed could enable the following:

- Free wi-fi in the café area to facilitate occasional use
- Free sponsored crèche from 11am - 2pm, on week-days (commercial at the weekend)
- Free meeting room available on a booking system for not-for-profit organisations
- Free rehearsal space for, e.g., Creative Youth
- Free Club Incubator space for start ups (limited period)
- Free facilitated co-worker-hub workspace for young enterprises

### GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURE

TOPO will need a vehicle for fundraising, fund-holding, and, eventually, facilities management (FM) of the venue, and we expect that the start-up and options analysis funding will help us to choose the right structure for our not-for-profit purposes. This could be a co-operative, a charitable trust with a board of trustees, a Community Interest Company or Industrial Provident Society for the benefit of the community, a limited company...

Co-operatives UK *Select-a-structure* tool is also useful for community groups wishing to determine the most appropriate legal structure for their venture.

*See also next section.*

## 6. TOPO HISTORY

Over the decade or so that The Old Post Office has been empty and disused, various local groups have expressed interest in and some concern about the Grade-2-listed buildings on the site. At least one of these listed buildings is now on the English Heritage At Risk register where the main building is described as follows:

"Former Head Post Office, 42 Eden Street, Kingston upon Thames, Kingston upon Thames, Greater London. Post office built in 1875. Three storeys in red brick with stone dressings. Works for internal improvements and weather proofing were carried out in 2008/2009 in preparation for leasing out. However, the reuse of the building has been delayed due to wider considerations relating to the Council's aspirations for town centre renewal as set out in the K+20 Area Action Plan."

In 2012, Kingston Environment Centre, inspired by its need to find permanent new premises and to bring environmentalism into the mainstream, brought together a wide range of residents and community and arts groups to discuss ways of conserving and reviving these buildings for community use. Two public meetings in July and October 2012, and a "Have your say" initiative (see page 4, box on right, and back page) generated much enthusiasm and many attractive and creative ideas that could bring something new and interesting to Kingston and provide a flexible and sociable base for many groups, activities and enterprises that can currently encounter difficulties in finding appropriate spaces in the town centre. Participants also suggested "blocks" and "bridges" to progress.

"This is a handsome building and should be turned into some type of exhibition space/ community-based hub where all members of Kingston's wonderfully diverse residents mix and share."  
*Respondent to TOPO "Have Your Say" consultation*

Some of these groups and potential users could contribute to making a community hub financially viable; others need low cost or free space (such as a tolerant café) where they can get together. Out of the second public meeting, in October 2012, a Steering Group of volunteers representing a range of stakeholders was formed to work on Phase 1 of this community project.

### Phase 1

Phase 1 of TOPO consists of a small Steering Group of representative stakeholders and potential users, with some *pro tem* agreed terms of reference and a wider network of supporters. The Steering Group has met almost monthly since December 2012 to undertake research and make progress on practical plans and strategies, with the help of specialist working groups and volunteers, some of whom have experience and expertise in fund-raising, running a business or creative enterprise, architecture and development, or campaigning, with Kingston Environment Centre taking a lead role. The Steering Group has set up a free community website (<http://e-voice.org.uk/topo>) and a Facebook page and a community bank account, collaborated on this Propectus and other literature, is investigating funding sources and a feasibility study, and as early as possible would like to survey the buildings and site. A small grant from Kingston Council in early 2014 covers some of our printing and administrative costs.

### Phase 2

The Steering Group will evolve into a more permanently constituted entity, capable of fund-raising, fund-holding and negotiating with other interested parties. There are numerous forms this entity could take (see page 10) and it will be a Phase 1 - 2 transition task to select the best model for our purposes.

### Phase 3

This entity would eventually take on the responsibilities of managing the venue and its facilities: acting as a landlord and facilities management; ensuring that income covers outgoings, hiring staff, overseeing maintenance...

*There is more history, including that of the site, in our on-line edition.*



How TOPO began: consulting the community in July 2012



<http://e-voice.org.uk/topo>