

14 how to set up a self-managed social centre



Matilda Cavallo

Having established in the previous chapter that reclaiming the ‘commons’ is an urgent and necessary task, how can we put this into practice? How can we, in our daily lives, create space to meet, plan and socialise and reclaim the commons? A quick look around most cities shows us that there is a real shortage of places to live, meet, think, drink or eat, without the government on your back, the corporations branding your experience or your wallet taking a battering. Luxury condos, apartments, air conditioned offices and chic boutiques are the downtown norm, growing endlessly and attracting those with large incomes whilst at the same time displacing those lower down the social ladder. This chapter shows how we can take back control, if only in a small way, of the places where we live, by focusing on the experiences of setting up independent social centres which bring together a number of activities like meeting spaces, cinemas, cafes or open access computers. These can be applied to self-managed projects of many sizes and types such as info shops, resource centres, community cafes or large occupied communities or land squats. It’s not just about what we actually do in these spaces, but also the process of learning and developing our politics we go through to set up and organise these projects.

This chapter provides concrete advice on how to open, organise and maintain these types of self-managed spaces. Intentionally, it combines information for those who aim to squat, rent and buy, which are important political choices. Information in this chapter draws on experiences in the UK and existing guides. While many general ideas remain the same wherever you are, you need to seek out help appropriate to your locality or country, especially in terms of technical and legal matters where differences may have big implications. This is meant to be a guide to help get people started. It is certainly not a blueprint or ‘one size fits all’ approach – there is a rich tradition of autonomous space projects all of which provide their own lessons and inspirations.

making a plan

What's the big idea?

The possibilities are endless and there is no one set format, but you need to ask yourself some questions. What do you want to achieve? What is the actual need? Is there support for the idea and people committed to putting it into practice? Are there groups in the area that would use the place? Have there been squats or other short-term projects, and how did they work out? Will the effort be worth it?

Box 14.1 To squat or not?

If it's feasible, don't be put off by squatting to try out your idea. However, be fully aware of the legal consequences of squatting which may involve fines, confrontations with the police, neighbours or other squatters, or criminal records. If you are new to squatting

What to include?

There are lots of different models you can think about:

- An info shop which is a focus for a particular campaign or group
- A radical bookshop
- A resource centre which offers advice sessions, books and guides, and online resources
- Independent open-source media centres and hacklabs
- A cafe or bar which promotes food and drinks politics, such as veganism, fair trading, local sourcing, and organic products
- Affordable space for gigs for local artists
- Independent cinema showing documentary films
- Rural projects, land squats and ecovillages
- Housing co-operatives
- Larger centres which bring together many of the above elements.



You also need to ask yourself do you want to buy (which will tie you down for a number of years and start your project off with a gigantic debt), rent (which may tie you down for a few months) or squat (which can be as long as you want, before you get kicked out)!

it's definitely a good idea to get involved with people who have experience. The ability to squat takes different forms in different places. In countries like the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany successful negotiations often follow occupations, especially if you can claim residence. In Scotland, Ireland and the USA it is illegal. Squatting in England and Wales is not criminal or illegal, although it is generally seen as such. Thus it is UNLAWFUL, NOT ILLEGAL. For exact laws on squatting and what constitutes 'squatters rights' consult the Squatters Handbook (Advisory Services for Squatters 2005). The main points include:

Squatting: key points

- Find a place that doesn't look too smart – places are often easier to occupy if they are owned by the council, a university or other large public institution. Commercial landlords and property companies are unpredictable.
- Get in quietly without doing any damage.
- Secure all the entrances and change the lock on the entrance you are using.
- Check that the water, gas and electricity are on or can be turned on; sign on for gas and electricity straight away.
- Make sure that someone is in all the time, especially during the day, at least until the owner or council officials come round.
- If the police, owners or council officials come round don't open the door, but tell them through the letterbox that this is now your home and you are not going to leave until the owners get a possession order to evict you.

Finding a building

So where do you want to be? In the middle of a local community or housing estate, on a busy high street or in the centre of a city? Each has their pros and cons. You might want to serve a poor neighbourhood or help fight a campaign, or be in a central place with maximising accessibility.

Whether you are looking to squat, buy or rent, the most effective way of finding a building is to walk, bike or drive round every street of the area you are interested in. If you are not sure, note the address and you can do a search for the owner through the Land Registry in the UK (see resources at the end of this chapter).

Box 14.2 Squat spotting

Most areas have large numbers of empty properties. The most important thing is to find a place you are not going to get evicted from quickly. It's difficult to tell how long a squat will last for. It could be a while or you could be evicted in a couple of weeks through the court. It's also important to know if the owner has a record of violent evictions. Opening a new squat is always a bit of a gamble but the more you know the better your situation. Check for signs of someone living or using the building, how easy it is to get in and what the condition of the place is. To find out if someone is going in and out, try sticking a small piece of cellotape across the bottom of the door opening or, better still, a hair held by two small blobs of superglue.

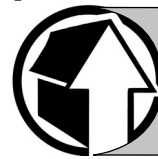
What state is it in? Using our own time and resources we can easily clean up a building. The main thing is that it is structurally OK and that the roof, floors and walls are in good condition.

sorting out the paperwork**I. Renting/buying**

If you are going to go down the legal route there will be a lot of paperwork to sort out.

Sorting out the details If you put in an offer to buy a building, you need to get a valuation report and a surveyors report, building plans, a 'Schedule of Works', and quotes from builders for professional work, and submit these to anyone you are borrowing money from, as well as to Building Control in your council whose approval you'll need. If you are simply renting a space, then you will probably have to do less, but be prepared to get any major building works checked out or done professionally.

If you find a building you want to rent or buy you need to check what type of use it is designated for – and you may need to get a change of use consent from the local



government to allow you to do what you want to do. This can take several weeks so don't sign away any money until this is sorted out.

Getting a structure To run a building legally some kind of registered legal structure will be needed, which means a certain amount of bureaucracy. You will need to appoint a secretary and treasurer, open a bank account, keep good accounts that you have to submit, have regular meetings, and issue members with shares or cards. You can get a bank account aimed specifically at community and not-for-profit groups, from banks such as Unity, Triodos, Ecology or the Co-operative Bank.

Box 14.3 Types of company structures in the UK

If you decide to set up a structure for your self-managed space, many people opt for a co-operative company. A co-operative is a business owned and controlled by its members, who also decide collectively on the application of profits. Outsiders cannot have a say in its running and, as a limited company, no one member can be held liable for the co-operative's assets and debts. There are a number of ways you can do this:

- *Limited Liability Company registered at Companies House (cheapest and simplest option)*
- *Co-operative company registered as a Friendly Society*
- *Community Interest Company (where assets are locked to the community)*
- *Community Land Trust (for larger land projects).*

Making a business plan A business plan is a plan of who you are, what you want to do and how you will do it. It is what you will be presenting to banks and people you want to borrow money from, so it should be well thought through and fairly respectable! You can get templates easily and they consist of the following:

- Basic outline of the proposal
- Description of the building and what will happen there
- Who will be involved and how it will be organised
- A breakdown of all the costs

- A cashflow with all projected inflows and outflows
- What you want to borrow.

Mortgage and loans If you are buying, look around for ethical lenders and any individuals who may wish to lend you money at low rates over a long period of time. You will usually get a mortgage for about 70 per cent of the cost of the project. As well as a mortgage to pay for the place, remember there will be other costs, such as conveyancing, legal fees, building works, stamp duty and loan repayments until you can generate income.

2. Squatting

The benefit of squatting a building is that you don't have to worry about all the bureaucracy associated with the above. However, even though you don't do so much official paperwork, it's useful to sort out things like collecting and banking money, dealing with solicitors, owners, the media and bailiffs, and getting the utilities turned on.

getting in and setting up

1. Renting/buying

Once you have the building, you've only passed stage one! If you want to open to members or the public, especially if you want to serve alcohol or have entertainment, there are a number of things you need to do.

Getting a premises license If you want to hold any entertainment that is deemed regulated or sell alcohol legally, then you need to get a premises license. If you want to operate as a members' club, then you need to get a Club Premises Certificate. It's fairly expensive, there's lots of paperwork, and you will need to meet a list of conditions covering crime and disorder, health and public safety, environmental health, public nuisance and protecting children from harm.

Other things you should consider include: public liability and buildings insurance, business rates (not-for-profit organisations can get discounts); and getting connected to water, electricity, gas and telephone services (where you can use green or ethical suppliers).



2. Squatting

Getting in The most difficult part of squatting is actually gaining possession, often due to steel doors, window grilles and padlocks. It is illegal to get into a property by breaking in or damaging windows and doors. You could be arrested even if the damage is minimal. You reduce the risk of running into legal problems if you find a property that you can get into easily. Opening a squat by yourself can be risky; it's safer and often more fun to do it with others. Choose a sensible time of the day – most people get a bit jumpy if they hear suspicious noises at night. When you move in, try to make the place look lived in.

Box 14.4 Changing the Lock

The first thing to do after getting in is to change the lock on the front door and secure all the entrances. Until you have control over who comes in and out, you do not have possession and can be evicted straight away if the owner or police come round. It is a good idea for one person to be putting on the lock while others secure windows and other doors, put up curtains, get the kettle on and generally prepare to show that you mean to stay. If there is one, take the old Yale lock off by unscrewing it. Replace the old cylinder with a new one and put the lock back on. Keep the old cylinder in a safe place in case you are accused of theft. You'll need to add a stronger lock, such as a mortice, later on.

Security Putting up a legal warning (called a Section 6 Notice, which you can get from the Advisory Service for Squatters or download from their website) in a front window or on the front door may be helpful, as it may deter the police or owner from breaking in. But you must have someone in a place all the time to back it up. A legal warning will not stop you being evicted on its own. Giving a printed copy to the police saves you trying to explain verbally that you can stay if they arrive early on.

Dealing with the police After you've changed the lock, it is best to start moving your things in as soon as possible. This is the point when the police are most likely to arrive. Don't let them in if you can avoid it. However, the police do have a legal right

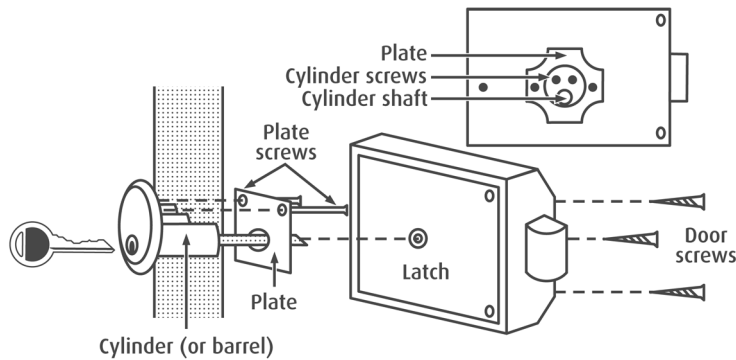


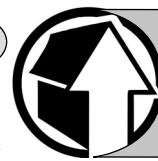
Figure 14.1 Fitting a Yale lock

Source: The Squatters Handbook (2005).

to enter a place if they have a warrant. You should tell the police something like: 'We have moved in here because we have nowhere else. We did not break anything when we entered and we have not damaged anything since. It isn't a criminal matter, it's a civil matter between us and the owners, and they must take us to court for a possession order if they want us to leave'.

Getting connected to utilities Gas and electricity can be deadly. Make sure someone knows what they are doing. If in doubt seek help. If supplies have been disconnected it is probably too much hassle to get the supplies back on. It is an offence to take gas and electricity, and since you can get a supply connected and pay for it, even in a squat, it might be worth it.

organising the space and its activities



The size and dimensions of your space, as well as time and money, shape its possibilities and limitations. Social centres usually become hubs for a huge variety of direct action groups, campaigns and activities including: anarchist, anti-capitalist and working-class politics, peace, anti-consumerist politics, asylum and migration issues, queer politics, co-operative politics, environmental politics, media and creative resistance, international solidarity or anti-privatisation struggles. Whether you are squatting, renting or buying, here are some tips on how spaces can be organised.



Figure 14.2 Fliers from UK social centres

Source: Matilda Cavallo.

Getting people involved

You might not have a shortage of ideas, but it can become a nightmare if it all comes down to a few people working very hard. There needs to be enough people, from the start, interested in taking on different aspects of running the centre, as well as a steady stream of new active members (and there will be a turnover of people) as well as new volunteers. You can't run round forcing people to pitch in, but there are steps you can take to make getting involved as accessible as possible:

- Have information on how to get involved on membership applications and general leaflets.
- Put up notices around the place.
- Create a rota system that people can sign up to.
- Encourage people to be welcoming to anyone interested in actively helping out.
- Hold 'open days' for those wanting to actively help run the centre with information on volunteering and talks about the structure of the centre.
- Advertise general meetings well.

How are you going to meet?

Whatever the status of your space, you'll need to set up meetings to make decisions. If you are committed to making decisions without leaders then it's a good idea to set up a way of meeting and making decisions that reflects this (see Chapter 4). Most centres have an open general meeting of all members (weekly, biweekly or monthly) at a set time. Good facilitation is essential to making large meetings run well. Meetings will soon plummet if they are poorly facilitated, dominated by an obvious clique or if people perceive their input isn't valid. Being open and flexible is the key to building vibrant autonomous spaces.

Keeping in touch

Email is an essential organisational tool in today's connected world. But be aware of potential problems and how to resolve them. For example, it's worth remembering that many people still don't have email, so don't use it for making decisions. Make sure you print out any important emails like proposals or agendas and physically post them up on notice boards. Designate someone to make phone calls to contact people who don't have email about meetings, etc. Many of us suffer from email overload and if your lists are high traffic you could try different types of lists which people can subscribe to – separating, for example, organising, announcements or political discussions. Emails can also



be full of misunderstandings and flaring so make sure you have a clear users guide from the beginning and a good moderator who is prepared to implement it. Rotate this role as it can be a lot of work.

Getting enough resources together

Resources, especially financial ones, are always scarce. Good ways to raise money include membership fees, direct debits, benefit gigs, donations, cafes, bars or bookshops selling solidarity products like T-shirts, fair trade coffee, CDs and DVDs. Some social centres buy buildings big enough to include a housing co-operative, which helps pay towards the running costs of the social centre. But a key resource is enough people willing to support the project in their spare time. Normally, most people will offer their time only for a while leaving a smaller group of volunteers to do the majority of the work. People are not normally paid, which helps towards a feeling of equality.

Getting activities happening

You might have different groups of people already interested in taking on different aspects of the centre. In general meetings you can discuss the potential uses of the space and identify areas that need collectives to figure out what to do. Remember to have clear contact details for all these groups and a way that people can propose new activities and be supported in getting them going. Social centres are about helping people to feel that they are not just consumers. A list of potential collectives includes:

- Cafe
- Bar
- Gigs/events
- Bookshop
- Garden
- Skills sharing
- Theatre
- Film club/cinema
- Bike workshop
- Art space
- Maintenance/cleaning
- Finance
- Kids club
- Community outreach
- Language classes

Connecting with the outside world

One of your aims may be to connect to groups outside your space. These may include your immediate neighbours (very important if you are squatting), potential volunteers and users of the building, campaign groups, those with certain needs, such as asylum seekers, the homeless, young people, those needing welfare advice, etc. Here are some tips:

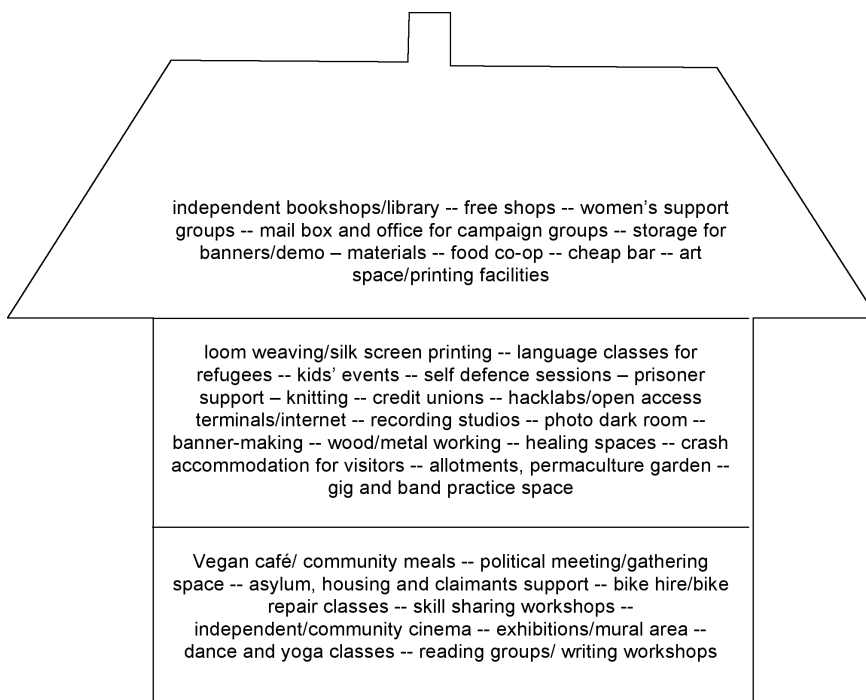


Figure 14.3 Activities in UK social centres

Source: Matilda Cavallo.

- Make a clear display area in the space on how to get involved.
- Use a sandwich board or events board outside the building.
- Make sure working collectives are clearly contactable and have regular, open meetings.
- Set up an email discussion/announcements/organising list but also make sure that those without email are contacted.
- Have a central phone contact or email address that is checked regularly but rotates around different people.
- Have a clear and easy to use website or monthly flier advertising all events happening, how to get involved, how to donate and find the space.
- Work with local groups to target new ones, such as asylum seekers, tenants groups, those with disabilities.



Box 14.5 Some key bits of the social centres jigsaw

A members club

Many social centres set themselves up as members clubs. This means access is restricted to members and guests, and you have to adopt rules covering issues such as joining policy, conduct, aims, etc. The centre can be open to the public at other times and the members restrictions only usually apply when alcohol is on sale or regulated entertainment is occurring. It's easy to get over a thousand members just through friends and people visiting. You can become a members club by adopting a set of rules at a general meeting.

Finances

Having a well organised finance collective is a real priority, especially if there are legal requirements to pay bills on time and produce accounts.

Cafe

To serve food to the public you will need to be a registered food business that maintains food hygiene standards. A cafe collective will need to look into feasible opening times and staffing, a workable menu, suppliers, organising training in food hygiene, setting prices, and getting all the necessary equipment together.

Organising events

A building with multiple uses may lead to double bookings and clashes, and needs some co-ordination of uses and events. This is also something to discuss at a general meeting: what is the building used for and how is this co-ordinated? A bookings co-ordinating collective is a good way to do this.

Taking responsibility

Running an open, busy space, especially one that serves alcohol, means that inevitably there will be conflicts. Make sure that volunteers are well supported and not left isolated or vulnerable. You can undertake de-escalation training to help with conflict and set up a mediation group. It's important that there are designated co-ordinators for important tasks, such as cashing up and locking up.

- Have an attractive leaflet explaining clearly what the space is for and distribute it regularly.
- Make sure information about your space is on relevant contact lists, for example, in the volunteers bureau or on lists of community resources.

leaving and moving on

Self-managed spaces close or move on for a variety of reasons. A campaign may end, group energy may be sapped, finances may go belly up, the landlord may cancel your tenancy. In the case of squats, groups are usually evicted.

If you are serious about fighting an eviction then there are key things you should do:

- Get lots of support from everyone you know – the more people the better.
- Set up a rota so there are people there all the time.
- Set up a watch to keep an eye out for the police and bailiffs. Remember bailiffs often use physical force, so watch out for this.
- Agree in advance a timetable, for example, how long are you prepared to stay and resist.
- Get people with specific skills – climbers for going on the roof, samba band for making lots of noise, someone to write a press release, people to talk to the local media.
- Contact the media and get them and the community on your side (stress any aspects favourable to you, for example, is it a David and Goliath battle against developers?). What positive things have you done whilst there which will make people support you?
- Video it – it will document any illegal actions by the police and bailiffs and may also be useful evidence later. Make some huge banners to advertise what's happening to the world.
- If it all goes belly up, make a contingency plan and have somewhere else to go.
- Be prepared to also build physical defences to resist evictions, such as barricades. Have enough people outside and inside to protect the doors and windows.



This chapter has outlined some of the basic ideas, contacts and skills for setting up autonomous spaces. It's hard work and there is no avoiding the problems – dealing with difficult people, lack of money, free time or resources, and problems with the police and authorities. But it is immensely rewarding to be part of a collective, self-

Box 14.6 Squat Eviction

Unless the owner simply gets their place back because nobody was in, they must apply to the courts for a possession order. Any other method will probably be illegal. Fortunately, illegal evictions are rare but you should always try to take action against anyone who does this or even tries to. In the UK, the usual claim for a possession order against squatters is a standard one of 'trespass'. But there's the possibility of a nasty optional add-on, an application for an Interim (or temporary) Possession Order (IPO). This was one of the anti-squatting measures in the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. The nasty bit is that once an IPO is made against you and served on the squat, normally by letter, it's a criminal offence not to leave within 24 hours, and the police can arrest and charge you. DON'T PANIC ABOUT SUCH A LETTER. It just means the owner has found out you're there. It doesn't necessarily even mean they're going to take you to court soon. That will depend on how urgently they want the place, how efficient they are and luck!

managed project. Go and talk to other people who have done this. Make a plan, think about it, get people excited – but at the end of the day experiment and do it!

Matilda Cavallo lives between Italy and the UK and has been involved in squatting and setting up social centres for over a decade. This chapter also draws on information taken from The Squatters Handbook and guides by the Cowley Club social centre in Brighton and the Radical Routes Network in Leeds.

resources

Books and guides

- Advisory Service for Squatters (2005). *The Squatters Handbook*. 12th edition. London: Advisory Service for Squatters.
- Cleaver, Harry (1998). 'The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle'. In *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*. Eds John Holloway and Eloina Peláez. London: Pluto Press, www.eco.utexas.edu/~hmcleave/zaps.html

- Coates, Chris (2000). *Utopia Britannica. British Utopian Experiments 1325–1945*. London: Diggers and Dreamers Publications.
- Corr, Anders (1999). *No Trespassing. Squatting, rent strikes and land struggles worldwide*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press.
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- Pilger, John (2002). *The new rulers of the world*. London: Verso.
- Radical Routes (1998). *How to set up a housing co-op*. Leeds: Cornerstone Resource Centre.
- Rogue Element (2003). *You can't rent your way out of a social relationship*. Leeds: Rogue Element.
- Shiva, V. (1997). *Biopiracy. The plunder of nature and knowledge*. Totnes, Devon: Green Books.
- Stiglitz, J. (2002). *Globalisation and its Discontents*. London: Allen Lane.
- Terrorism*. New York: Autonomedia.
- The Cowley Club with Radical Routes (2006). *How to set up a social centre*. Brighton: Radical Routes.
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- Wates, N. (1980). *Squatting: The real story*. London: Bay Leaf Books.
- Zukin, Sharon (1992). *The Culture of Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Websites

General

- Diggers and Dreamers Guide to Communal Living www.diggersand-dreamers.org.uk
- Intentional Communities http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intentional_community
- Social Centres http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_center
- The Commoner www.commoner.org.uk/ (A web journal for other values.)
- The Land is Ours www.thelandisours.org/



Squatting

Advisory Service for Squatters www.squatter.org.uk

Italian Squats <http://tutto.squat.net>

No Frills Melbourne Squatters Guide www.geocities.com/squattersguide

Schnews Squatting Guide www.schnews.org.uk/diyguide/squatting.htm

Squat Net <http://squat.net/>

Squatters Handbook Australia www.cat.org.au/housing/book.htm

Wikipedia Definition <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squatting>

Networks

Global Infoshops Network www.eco-action.org/infoshops/

Italian Social Centres www.ecn.org/presenze/

UK Social Centres Network www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk

Co-operative advice/finance

Catalyst Collective Ltd www.eco-action.org/catalyst

Co-operative and Community Finance www.icof.co.uk

Co-operatives UK www.cooperatives-uk.coop

Industrial Common Ownership Movement www.icof.co.uk/icom

National Community Development Association www.ncdaonline.org

National Confederation of Co-operative Housing www.cch.org.uk

Radical Routes www.radicalroutes.org.uk

Social Centres Network www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk

Upstart Services Ltd www.upstart.coop

Working Men's Clubs and Institutes Union www.wmciu.org.uk

UK Government sites

Companies House www.companieshouse.gov.uk

Financial Services Authority www.fsa.gov.uk

UK Licensing Act 2003 www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2003/20030017.htm

E-lists

Infoshops e-list send an email to lists@tao.ca with the words 'subscribe infoshops'

London Social Centres Network londonscn@yahoo.co.uk

UK Social Centres Network <http://lists.riseup.net/www/info/socialcentrenetwork>