

# OCSET application to rent EOCC ex-Claimants Union space

## What is OCSET?

OCSET is a social centre whose unifying belief is that social change is necessary and cannot happen without practical projects to bring it about, including a change in how we live together. It is a political project made up of diverse groups of people. OCSET aims to contribute to the building of community and make deep thought about important issues more normal.

We have diverse experience in the group, including:

- People with experience of setting up information community cafés
- Indymedia activists with expertise including building, programming and using computers, film making and camera work, community training in film and video
- Individuals with long campaigning experience through Corporate Watch, CND, Undercurrents and other campaigns, including media relations/press work
- Community workers with an understanding of the provision of community and especially advice services
- Individuals with experience of initiating community projects such as a food co-operative and community gardening
- Artists including visual, performance, verbal and electronic
- Local residents with specific skills to offer and share such as gardening, cooking, building and lots of enthusiasm
- People with a proven track record of commitment to projects and campaigns

OCSET has begun in three different squatted premises since early April, and we have already carried out a wide range of community-based activities. We have held free community cafes every week, we have been a centre for Oxford indymedia, a library has been set up, and there have been video training workshops, a poetry workshop and an art exhibition. A lot of things, however, could not happen because of our frequent evictions and moves. The impermanence of squatting also prevented us from developing our premises for example by making our premises accessible to wheelchairs. We have been an information point to varying degrees in all of our locations so far. The squatted spaces have brought the group together and tested our commitment to the sustainability of the project, so that we are now ready to take on renting premises.

## Financing

We have secured a grant of £10,000, available as soon as we are ready with premises.

OCSET already has a bank account, and is in the process of constituting itself with a Memorandum of Association.

Donations requested at entertainments and for use of the media centre are expected to cover premises and all other costs. The user-groups are all entirely volunteer-based and our expenses are very low. We therefore expect to be able to use the grant money as capital to develop and refurbish OCSET.

We would therefore like to offer at the outset to rent the space for two years, but our plans are for a sustainable project which would enable us to renew the contract if offered. Please let us know if this is not acceptable, as we are confident that alternative arrangements regarding the contract could be made.

## **THE EOCC-BASED PROJECT**

The space would be open at regular weekday hours plus whenever an event is booked there. The space would provide the following facilities for the community:

### **A Community Media Centre run by Oxford Indymedia**

Oxford Indymedia (<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/oxford>) was set up a year ago and is running very successfully as one of the new regional indymedia centres on the global indymedia network. Its main activity is a website committed to alternative local news in all media (print, photo, radio, and video), and its guiding principle is "open publishing", where Oxford citizens publish their own news without editorial interference. It regularly runs very popular video screenings, which outreach to other communities in Oxford. Issues covered in recent months include road protest, Palestine, asylum-seekers, and a visit from Brighton-based alternative newspaper "Schnews". EOCC has hosted two of these screenings. Since working with OCSET, screenings became weekly rather than monthly.

The media centre would be a unique facility in Oxford, providing the following:

- Free public access internet with a fast broadband connection
- Printing at cost price
- A video editing station
- Training courses in using open source software
- Video training free of charge

The equipment for this project has already been acquired, but was impossible to set up in OCSET until now because of the practical difficulties of squatted property.

### **Campaign and Projects Office**

Indymedia will also provide some computers to equip a second office or space with word processing, internet and DTP capabilities for the use of groups or individuals. A charge to cover costs will be asked for that equipment.

### **Library and Information Point**

OCSET already has a book collection, and given secure space we will build a library of political, spiritual or cultural writing that relates to our approach of thoughtfulness and questioning. We will also have a space for groups to display their information about issues and about themselves. In addition, there will be an ever-expanding website review of the best sites on the web.

### **Meeting Space**

The larger space would be made freely available to groups who are too small to afford hiring space. OCSET has already been providing this service, which would include the following groups:

- Rising Tide – a campaign group on climate change, which expects to continue to use the main hall at EOCC as before for larger meetings
- Seeds for Change – a group which trains community activists in skills such as consensus decision-making
- The Sea Green Singers – a community choir

- Oxford Brazil Solidarity – which works to support landless communities in Brazil
- A Squatters' Advisory Service
- Oxford indymedia
- Oxford Students Activist Network
- A Christian group who run regular food events
- “Hammer and Tongue” poetry slam group

These groups would see EOCC as first port of call for hiring space for larger meetings, where available, thereby increasing revenue to EOCC and its use as a community space.

When it was not a meeting room, the main part of the building would be a more informal social space. It would be a welcome alcohol-free and smoke-free place, and we would offer coffee and tea at cost. The booking and use of the space as a meeting room would stop it from becoming simply a drop-in centre. We would welcome other EOCC volunteers to use the space for meetings and relaxation.

### **Gardening**

Some people in the group will create an urban garden in pots in the space we have and teach people about doing that in their yards.

### **Events**

The larger indoor space and also the outdoor area, if and when possible, would be used for events. Again, it would suit activities too small to require the main hall. Things that people among us are already planning to organise:

- smaller indymedia screenings
- a weekly secondhand swap day
- poetry and acoustic music
- free food
- art exhibitions

### **Who benefits?**

Many people will benefit from the fact that this part of EOCC will be visited more. People will come for one event and see the information from lots of other groups. The media centre run by indymedia will make a major contribution to democratising the media in Oxford. In our previous locations, people commented that the non-commercial nature of OCSET made it really valuable, enabling people to sit down without smoke and without feeling obliged to buy anything. New artists and poets will also be exposed to small but supportive audiences and will benefit greatly from that.

EOCC itself will benefit from the greater use of the community centre, as larger events seek to hire space in the main building. Use of the Social Club bar would increase as people naturally gravitate there from events. EOCC volunteers would benefit from OCSET being an open social space which they could use.