



Draft Public Art Policy: Blyth Valley Borough Council

Richard Hollinshead, Public Art & Design Officer

v.4

Public Art Policy

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Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Synopsis

With the expectation that approximately 12 artworks will be realised in Blyth Valley between 2004 and 2006, and the likelihood that a substantial programme will follow, it is essential that this process be well managed from the start, and that council policy and basic 'housekeeping' issues are resolved. This document outlines the key opportunities within the INSPIRE project, its major benefits in the community, and highlights potential problems regarding the artworks created during the project. It proposes three key actions that I consider essential to maximise the opportunity and ensure its long-term sustainability.

The formal adoption of this policy and its recommendations would demonstrate a commitment to the development of public art across the district, building on the Council's current support for the INSPIRE project.

1.2 Background to the INSPIRE project

The INSPIRE project (South-East Northumberland Public Art Initiative) is a partnership between Blyth Valley Borough Council, Wansbeck District Council, Northumberland County Council, SENNTRi and Greening for Growth. It receives financial support from all three councils, Arts Council England and the Northumberland Strategic Partnership. The project aims to operate at both a strategic level through advocacy and policy development, and at a delivery level through the commissioning of approximately 25 pieces of public art in the next two financial years. To meet this expectation it includes a Public Art & Design Officer post until March 2006, providing both the capacity and expertise to implement this broad programme.

1.3 Recommendations for action

- **That BVBC will act as an exemplar for the integration of high-quality public art and design into new buildings, by ensuring the integration of artworks into public or publicly-funded buildings and regeneration schemes. This principle should be enshrined in guidelines provided to architects and landscape designers contracted by BVBC.**
- **That a clear statement is included in the Local Plan requiring private developers to incorporate public art and design into planning applications for all medium/large commercial or residential developments, and to liaise with the Public Art Officer on this issue.**
- **The creation of a centrally-held Suspense Account to cover the maintenance of public art during a three year 'establishment period'.**

Section 2: Background

2.1 Public Art - Definition

Public Art integrates artists' skills, vision and creative abilities into the process of creating new spaces and regenerating old ones, imbuing the development with a unique quality and creating a visually stimulating environment. As a regeneration tool Public Art is a broad term that can include sculpture, photography, lighting, painting, moving imagery and projections, architectural glasswork and ironwork, furniture, text, tapestries, ceramics, signage, flooring, the design of spaces, play areas/structures, acoustic commissions etc. The artworks could range in scale from a small plaque attached to a wall through to an earthwork covering several hectares. They could be sited outdoors or in publicly accessible indoor spaces. Temporary artworks and events can be just as important to the renaissance of a place as a permanent piece. Artworks could relate to local heritage, to our aspirations for the region, or simply to the materials and colours of the local area. But the one consistent and essential quality for a successful piece of public art is that it is developed for a specific site and relates to it.

Collaboration is a key element of successful public art projects, and artists are increasingly brought in at the earliest stages to work as a professional member of a design or project team, contributing a range of creative skills and experience to the decision making process.

2.2 The Role of Public Art

Aside from the diversity of materials, techniques and approaches through which public art can be achieved, it can also fill a variety of roles. It can act as a high-visibility indicator of confidence in the future of the region, as a way of understanding and navigating through built up areas, it can celebrate, challenge and explore the social and cultural aspects of a particular area, and can be a major tool for community engagement. Well managed and resourced, it should bring this range of roles together within individual projects.

Public art has a vital role to play in maintaining or creating a distinct identity or sense of place, affirming and strengthening its uniqueness. By working with communities it can create ownership not just of the artwork itself, but of the surrounding space – consultation on public art, done well, can be an important route for communities to get actively involved in much more wide-ranging improvement schemes.

An important aspect of public art is its ability to challenge accepted conventions, and it should never be bland – all artworks should bring a new perspective to familiar places. The initial controversy surrounding the Angel Of The North, and its subsequent popularity and iconic status, is a reminder that the council should be prepared to take fresh approaches to public space.

2.3 Why Now?

In line with a national trend in the commissioning of Public Art, the North-East and in particular Gateshead, Newcastle and Sunderland has seen a considerable amount of

commissioning in the last ten years. This programme has had a clear impact on the identity, atmosphere and perception of those cities for both the communities involved and for investors and visitors from outside the region.

Within Blyth Valley the existing %forArt policy has largely 'laid fallow' due to the lack of specialist skills and capacity necessary to manage the commissioning process, and through the absence of a clear policy requirement to include Public Art in development. A substantial list of potential public art projects generated in November 2003 at the beginning of the INSPIRE project, and the Northumberland Public Art review recently completed by Commissions North, has clearly demonstrated that opportunities for Public Art are remaining unexploited.

With the INSPIRE Public Art & Design Officer in place until March 2006, Blyth Valley currently has both the capacity and expertise to develop this policy and establish its implementation. There is a window of opportunity in which to enshrine the role of public art as an essential element of both private and public regeneration and economic development projects, and to ensure the sustainability of the INSPIRE project by expanding awareness of the commissioning process within the planning and regeneration departments, community groups and regional developers.

Current levels of interest from the private sector, and regeneration initiatives for Blyth town centre and port make the adoption of a clear policy for the inclusion and encouragement of public art and design more pressing than ever.

2.4 Why adopt this public art policy?

- It complies with existing BVBC cultural policy, the 'Linkage and Leverage' Northumberland Cultural Strategy 2002/2008, and the SENNTRi delivery plan 2003-2006.
- A formal statement provides a consistent and coherent approach to public art across the authority, and with growing levels of private investment in regeneration schemes within Blyth Valley, the adoption of the developers' guidelines recommendation (1.3) would maximise the potential public art outcomes through private development.
- Public Art can attract modest additional funds to the development process, and more significantly can strengthen funding applications for major regeneration projects.
- Investment in Public Art encourages sustainable cultural activity through the employment of artists, encouraging the small number of professionally qualified artists working in Blyth Valley to remain, and further artists to relocate here.
- Expectations with regard to the quality of environmental improvements and cultural provision in Blyth Valley are growing with its regeneration. The programme will make a significant contribution to the creation of high quality spaces and buildings, raising the standard of living for residents and making the area generally more attractive to new employers and employees.
- Public Art is a key indicator for quality business sites, enabling them to compete effectively for inward investment against competition within the wider region.

- Failure to resolve future resources and responsibility for the public art programme will limit its short-term effectiveness, sustainability as an initiative, and the long-term benefit of its legacy.

Section 3: Council policy and implementation

3.1 How can the council implement a Public Art policy?

Firstly, BVBC should be seen to practice what it preaches, acting as an exemplar for private development by integrating high quality, well resourced and managed public art and design into all major schemes. This principle should be enshrined in guidelines provided to architects and landscape designers contracted by BVBC.

Secondly, clear guidance for private developers should be included in the Local Plan and other relevant policy documents, requiring the incorporation of public art and design into planning applications for all medium/large commercial or residential developments, and to liaise with the Public Art Officer on this issue (see 3.2).

Although the Public Art & Design Officer will provide support for this process by maintaining a database of suitable artists, drawing up shortlists, drafting contracts and maintenance schedules, developing community consultation strategies etc, the success of the Public Art programme relies as always on a wider understanding of the process and an enthusiasm for high-quality developments. This essential co-operation between departments has been established but could be jeopardised by disagreement over responsibility for insurance excesses and maintenance, and this issue requires immediate resolution (see 4.1-2).

3.2 Guidelines for private developers

The most effective point for the inclusion of public art and design occurs as new developments are in the earliest stages of planning. This widens the range of approaches that can be taken, increases the opportunity for community engagement and maximises the potential for developing unique spaces that engender community pride and a sense of ownership. The Public Art officer needs to be made aware of new developments and involvement at the pre application stage is desirable. Development Control case officers will refer individual cases to the Public Art Officer at the earliest opportunity, and as a fail safe the Public Art Officer receives a copy of the weekly list planning applications received. The concept of Public Art will be included as part of development briefs as follows –

“BVBC recognises the value that Public Art and unique design can bring to new developments. To comply with Council policy, the developer will work with the Public Art & Design Officer to ensure the successful integration of commissioned public art and design works within the development proposals. Such proposals shall be submitted and agreed as part of the planning application.”

In this way public art becomes a set part of the development, budgeted for and properly integrated into the plan. This policy may be inappropriate for small developments such as individual houses, but should be applied to developments in receipt of public grant-funding, developments that create new public space to be adopted by BVBC, developments over 700m² that allow public access or have communal areas (such as reception atriums), and housing developments of more than ten dwellings. The route taken to comply with this policy requirement would be negotiated on a case by case basis by the Public Art &

Design Officer in reference to the scale and significance of the proposed development, but would typically follow the %forArt scheme.

Clearly the inclusion of Public Art brings additional quality to the development, and provision should therefore be made within the project budget to include this. Public Art is however generally part of public realm works and there is an argument for additional public funding - the Public Art Officer will provide advice to the developer on sources of match funding for arts development.

3.3 Section 106 Agreements

Section 106 agreements (where new developments place additional burden on the local community and the developer is asked to contribute to schemes to alleviate this – i.e. new schools, roads etc) will be required in appropriate circumstances to implement Public Art schemes where community backing has been received for projects in an area within which a new development sits.

Section 4: Long term management of the public artworks

4.1 Insurance policy excess

Insurance cover for the artworks will form part of the council's all-risk policy, and is unlikely to make a significant impact on the total cost of that policy. The Public Art Officer will complete the necessary risk assessment for each proposed artwork, and notify the Insurance Officer prior to installation.

The issue of departmental responsibility for the £15,000 insurance excess has already arisen in relation to bespoke shelters being designed for Scotland Gate in the Wansbeck District, and remains a major issue to be addressed. It is proposed that any claims be covered through the central risk fund, but that those departments assuming responsibility for the maintenance of the artworks should not automatically be expected to replenish the risk fund. This is essential in order that the cross-cutting role envisaged for the public art programme is not impeded by unnecessary friction between departments.

4.2 Funding ongoing maintenance

With the expectation that approximately 12 artworks will be realised in Blyth Valley between 2004 and 2006, and the likelihood that a substantial programme will follow, it is essential that a funding scheme for ongoing maintenance is resolved at the inception. Poorly maintained artworks will undermine the central role for which they have been commissioned – to improve the environment – and may result in a negative perception of public art amongst residents.

For all new projects, the maintenance process should work like this –

- 1) The artist will provide information on all materials and processes used in the creation of the artwork, its likely maintenance implications, and a proposed schedule for this work. The expected lifespan of the work will also be assessed, and this information added to a maintenance database by the Public Art Officer.
- 2) The most appropriate department for the maintenance of the artwork will be agreed - the majority of projects will fall within the purview of Parks & Green Spaces or Housing Services. Much of the maintenance can be carried out by Contract Services, with additional specialist work being required on an occasional basis (this will be identified by the artist during the commissioning process).
- 3) An average annual cost for the maintenance of the artwork for the first three years will be determined and agreed between the Public Art Officer and the relevant department. This will be proportionate to the total cost of the artwork, and will not exceed 10% of the total budget.
- 4) The amount required for maintenance will be included in the project budget from the outset, and be added to a centrally-held suspense account.
- 5) Money will be drawn down from the suspense account by the department that has assumed responsibility for the artwork, and maintenance carried out.

Whilst it is unrealistic to expect public art to be maintenance free, it should be remembered that the artist will be contractually required to produce robust, well constructed artworks, and that the maintenance costs will not be significantly different to other items on the council's Asset Register. After the initial three-year 'establishment' maintenance programme funded the project budget, then ongoing maintenance will be funded by BVBC adding an appropriate amount to the suspense account – in effect an agreement to 'adopt' the artwork for an extended period.

If a private developer wishes a publicly accessible artwork to be formally adopted by BVBC then the above process should be followed, and a contribution towards maintenance made to the suspense account. The Public Art Officer will seek to ensure that privately-owned, publicly-visible artworks will also be well maintained.

4.3 Decommissioning

Decommissioning of artworks may be required if –

- 1) The artwork is subject to severe damage and is deemed to be either unsafe or no longer functioning effectively as was intended by the artist.
- 2) The location for which the artwork was created is being redeveloped. As noted in 2.1, the essential feature of Public Art is its site-specific nature, and although a suitable new location for the artwork can often be found – where possible with the involvement of the artist – it may on occasion be inappropriate.
- 3) The artwork has reached the end of its proposed lifespan and is not deemed suitable for continued maintenance.

Any decision regarding possible decommissioning of an artwork by the Asset Management Team will be taken in conjunction with the Public Art Officer and where possible with the artist.

Contact Officer:

Richard Hollinshead

Public Art & Design Officer

r.hollinshead@wansbeck.gov.uk

01670 843440

This document was developed with the assistance of -

Richard Broderick, Public Art Officer, Newcastle, *Piers Masterson*, Public Art Officer, Sunderland, *Anna Pepperal*, Public Art Officer, Gateshead, *Matthew Jarratt* and *Rebecca Farley*, Arts Council England.

consultation within BVBC –

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