

WESTERN EXPANSION AREA: PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONING PLAN

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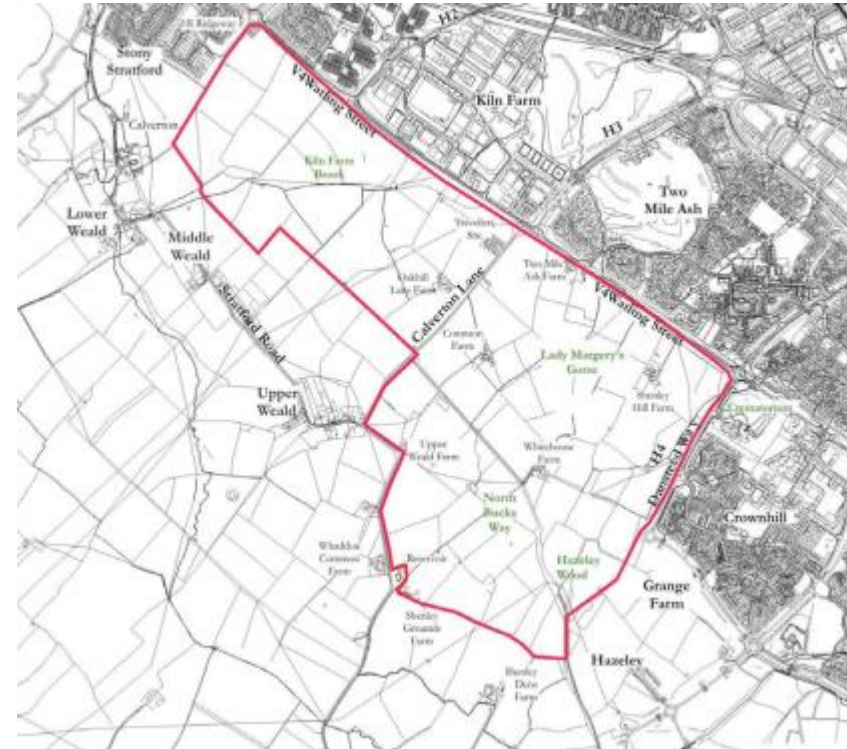
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1) INTRODUCTION

The Western Expansion Area (WEA)

The Western Expansion Area (WEA) is the largest development site in Milton Keynes, and will comprise c6000 new homes and substantial spatial allocations for community facilities including schools and green space. In accordance with local policy, national best practice and the commitment of site developer Gallagher Estates, an allocation of £565,000 has been agreed via the s106 process for the integration of public art into the development.

Western Expansion Area: Public Art Plan

A Public Art Plan for the WEA was agreed in 2013. (Appendix 1) The plan brought together previous research by landowner Gallagher's with policy and strategy for public art in Milton Keynes.

The plan outlines the context for public art commissioning alongside the potential opportunities the WEA development offers for commissioning artists to interpret place and engage with people. The following themes were identified:

- **Pre development investigations** – to engage artists document the landscape pre development or as the development starts to emerge from the landscape. An output of this phase could be a small multiple artwork which could be gifted to each new dwelling, or a trail engaging them with the area and its heritage.
- **Integrated artworks within the design process** – to commission artist to develop integrated artworks and design features within the open spaces and public realm. Features could draw attention to an interesting view or highlight a route through the development connecting key areas.
- **Engagement and animation** - interactions between artists and the emerging community is an important part of the public art

process, bringing people together in creative ways to explore and celebrate identity and sense of place.

Outputs will often be more ephemeral or temporary such as a publication or event but these outputs can have lasting outcomes and help to establish more regular community celebrations and interactions

The above themes were further explored through an engagement project to gauge interest and gather ideas for their delivery.

The Engagement project

Two creative engagement specialists – Carlos Cortes and Douglas Noble – were commissioned to engage with local people and other stakeholders between April and June 2013. They submitted their final report and recommendations in July 2013 (appendix 2)

The Public Art Plan alongside the engagement activities of Cortes and Noble have given the WEA public art commissioning plan a very strong start in terms of understanding the aspirations of local people. The resulting reports give clear messages that the involvement of people should be sustained throughout the commissioning period, and should not be tokenistic.

Both artists brought a wealth of expertise in engaging communities, and were able to successfully solicit the opinions and preferences of participants through a number of workshops, presentations, drop-in events, one-to-one sessions and an online survey. They engaged with all ages through these methods and engaged with several hundred people.

The methodologies they employed were thorough, innovative, well thought out and extensive in scope, meaning that the resultant reports can safely be said to offer a firm basis on which to develop further work. Both engagement reports offer valuable insight into community aspirations and will in due course become excellent reference documents for those artists selected to develop artwork proposals for the site. However neither report sets out a detailed vision for future

commissioning, or a methodology through which that commissioning should occur.

Purpose of the commissioning plan

The purpose of this commissioning plan is not to replicate or merge the findings of previous documents, but rather to **summarise the key findings** in a concise and easily digestible format for discussion, and finally to **propose the next steps through which public art opportunities for the WEA can be taken forward.**

The public art plan agreed in 2013 will still remain a reference document for the strategic context for public art alongside guidance on the process and management of the public art scheme.

2) KEY THEMES & APPROACHES

The themes and community aspirations identified in the engagement reports by Cortes and Noble are largely consistent with each other, and can be defined as a set of loosely overlapping areas of interest which link back to the original themes in the public art plan:

- A. Growth** – both the evolution of the WEA and its community will grow over a number of years. Aspirations suggest developing a project or artwork that evolves or can be added to, and as a commissioning process that ‘leaves room’ for future creativity
- B. Uniqueness** – an essential quality or element that makes commissioned artworks “very Milton Keynes”, and characterised by confidence, ambition, surprise, humour and a contemporary feel
- C. Interaction** – the creation of artworks and spaces that can be physically interacted with, played with, navigated, used to build stories around, learnt from, participated in or otherwise used over time
- D. Urban/Nature** – a quality specific to Milton Keynes, of artworks that recognise the interaction between the two rather than attempt to prioritise one over the other, and captures that spirit.
- E. Sustained engagement** – a desire from the local community that there be a sustained and meaningful engagement between artists and the community over many years

These themes should not be seen as independent strands, but as ‘facets’ of one coherent vision for public art on the WEA. These themes should guide the development of a number of projects which are delivered as the build programme progresses.

A. Growth

There are repeated suggestions around the theme of growth, relating physically to the housing estate itself but also to the creation of its community. Noble notes that growth and change is seen as an essential element of Milton Keynes, which young people in particular take as a given.

Cortes cites one concept proposed by a young person from St Giles Primary School as an example:

“His project was about wooden bunnies sculptures... One bunny is added when the community grows by X number of people, and they are designed to wear or carry something that could be seen as “trendy” at the time of the sculpture being made”.

What is significant of this suggestion is the idea that a commissioned artwork will capture and then represent the spirit of the time in which it was created.

On the one hand, public art should not be ‘bolted-on’ and should instead be **integrated from the outset** (as it has been through the commissioning of Noble & Cortes). Noble notes that his consultation process had already had a positive impact on public attitudes towards the WEA. On the other hand, there was also a frequently expressed demand to ‘**leave room**’, meaning to devise an arts commissioning process that will enable new members of the community to make their contribution to the public art commissions for the site. As Cortes notes: *“it’s quite likely that the new areas of the WEA will be low density to start with and perhaps this could be reflected in the planning of how Public Art will be used to engage people”* – i.e. that the number of artworks commissioned for the site, and their scale, will increase over several years. The commissioning process needs to sit comfortably with the phased build programme, with triggers in place to initiate projects as the build progresses.

B. Uniqueness

There is a consensus that MK is a unique place, with a clear sense of 'brand identity' that public art has played an important role in creating. The challenge for art commissioning in the WEA is to reflect and build upon Milton Keynes' existing public art collection, whilst simultaneously creating a new chapter in that history and a unique approach for the WEA.

The concept of 'uniqueness' was commonly referred to in the engagement activities, and in relation to artworks often means artworks with "*impact, either by scale, materials or concept*". This dovetails with the idea that there are artworks capable of being "*very Milton Keynes*". Being forward-looking artworks characterised by a feeling of **confidence and optimism**, that are **surprising, unexpected and stimulating**, are **contemporary in appearance**.

To embrace this special character is to seek artwork which is **bold, innovative and embraces an element of risk in the commissioning**. The Cortes report quotes two 'balloon sentences' created by young people at an open event, which read:

"ART IS GREAT PEOPLE" and **"TRUST ART PEOPLE"**

He states that a key component of the philosophy for the WEA Public Art programme should be to "*trust art and artists to do their job...*".

C. Nature and the Urban Environment

The engagement reports make many references to nature, and specifically to the interface between the 'urban' and 'natural'. What is very interesting about the responses in Milton Keynes is that although the relationship between the modern city and 'nature' was a core concern for many participants, both sides of this relationship were equally valued. There was a desire to explore the **interaction between a modern urban city and the open space, rather than a preference for one or other**.

This is exemplified by the "*big, organic structures with a shiny/modern look*" that were identified by the community as exemplars for suitable artworks.

Public art was seen as a valuable tool through which a dialogue between urban and countryside could commence, which Noble defines as a modern, contemporary approach that is still sensitive to a meaningful dialogue with the natural environment. He refers to interactive artworks that respond to changing conditions, with "organic", "interactive" and "weather responsive" being some of the words used to describe the artworks they chose that deal with such concepts.

Within this theme, the attenuation ponds shown in the WEA masterplan were highlighted as key locations for such artworks, with local people citing the effect of water and flooding on the local landscape.

D. Interaction

'Interaction' links strongly to each of the other themes or approaches:

- to the Growth theme through requests for artworks that evolve over time;
- to the Sustained Engagement approach through artworks that requires the community as active participants;
- to the Nature/Urban theme through the concept of seemingly disparate elements forming relationships, and of change through weather conditions;

But Interaction is also a theme in its own right through the commissioning of artworks that can be physically interacted with, played with, navigated, used to build stories around, learnt from, participated in or otherwise used over time. Small landscape areas where people can gather, socialise and participate in activities were seen as important, and these were seen as ideal locations for specific arts projects and commissions. Wayfinding is another significant aspect of this interaction theme, with public art having a potential role in helping people to navigate the WEA and feel welcome throughout it.

Two Mile Ash farm and local artists

The Two Mile Ash farm offers the opportunity of on-site artist's studio space or a broader cultural facility and hub for the WEA for long term and sustained creative activity. Cortes and Noble both visited nearby Westbury Arts Centre and identified how the farmhouse could be developed to offer similar or complementary activity. Certainly this needs consideration in the context of Milton Keynes portfolio of cultural organisations, but could provide an outward-looking creative space within the WEA community if the commissioning group feel it is relevant and can secure its use.

E. Sustained engagement with communities

In keeping with the Growth theme and the ideas of 'leaving room', sustained engagement over many years will be required to allow the emerging community to participate in the arts commissioning process. This can help to create a sense of ownership and supports community building.

Noble refers to ideas for participatory activities such as the creation of a 'Culture Quilt' by a community knitting project; and to artworks that provide a sense of welcome and a celebration of diverse origins of new residents. Cortes uses the metaphor of an Amish Barn, in which a major achievement is accomplished through a community working together. Such projects have great value, and can be developed to inform the proposals of professional artists as well as acting as creative outputs in their own right. There are numerous examples of public art projects that actively require the **mass-participation of the community in their creation**, but equally there are excellent projects where the **unique and idiosyncratic vision of an individual artist** has led to an artwork that becomes beloved by the local community.

Both engagement reports suggest that the design of small landscape areas where people can gather and socialise be left deliberately open, allowing for community participation and use to evolve. This could involve a range of artforms such as performances, music, literature and film. If progressed this would logically be linked to the creation of community spaces in the landscape – public art would be "*about activity, involvement and spaces for things to happen rather than simply things*".

3) POTENTIAL PROJECTS

The principles of 'leaving room' and in-depth community engagement throughout the development of the WEA means that not all art commissions should be over defined at this early stage. However a coherent plan is required, with some sensible art projects initiated to build momentum and integration into the construction schedule. The ongoing evaluation of initial projects will inform the development future phases of arts commissioning.

It should be understood that each of these proposed projects would be developed through engagement with the surrounding and emerging community.

These initial projects should also have degree of '**cross-pollination**' – to ensure a cohesive quality across the WEA and achieve a degree of value for money. This can be achieved organically by commissioning projects in parallel and ensuring meetings and connections between individual artists.

Looking ahead beyond this initial phase, the WEA will have five schools (four primaries and one secondary) that will become important hubs within the community. In keeping with the recent public art in schools programme art commissions should be embedded into the design and build process via the % for art mechanism.

For location plans with highlighted possible sites for commissioning please see appendix 3

Initial projects could be:

(1) Mass-participation artwork

An artwork led by an innovative artist capable of devising a project that captures the public imagination, and that ultimately leads to a either temporary or permanent features in the landscape that could only have been created with the *direct participation* of the community.

(2) Creative Engagement Activities

Ongoing artist involvement with the community, building on the work of Cortes and Noble the commissions should be developed with a view to informing future Artists' Briefs for permanent art commissions – by identifying themes, developing community interest in further participation etc.

(3) Landmarks and Places

A series of artworks in key locations within the WEA, they need to be of a scale to relate to space and to creatively connect the urban and open spaces. They should become highly visible waymarkers in the landscape as well as gathering spaces for community activity. It is envisaged that these artworks would be a hybrid sculptural and landform response.

(4) Wayfinding

These would typically be small additions into the built environment and landscape areas – signage, texts, small objects etc; and would support the Landmarks project by connecting up key spaces. Proposals would form part of a strategic vision for wayfinding capable of being adopted by individual developers and integration into the physical development of each construction site across the WEA.

(5) Evolving artwork

This commission should capture the concept of change. An artist would need to develop a framework or tool in the form of an artwork which could be changed and added to as the community emerges. It may require the artist to be retained on a longer term contract to return each year to facilitate activity.

(6) Our Place

Working in combination with trails and journeys this project would invite artists to undertake residencies, interacting with the community to catalogue and interpret people and place. It should include a range of artforms

(7) Trails and journeys

A digital approach would expand on wayfinding, exploring the idea of trails and journeys for the community to discover. The digital outputs should enable the neighbouring and emerging community to understand the history of place and interact with the changing landscape. The resulting dialogues can become an archive of the journey of place and link to Our Place

Phases of delivery

It is proposed that the initiation of projects is gradual to link with the build programme and enable evaluation to inform and define proposed projects further.

The wayfinding project is proposed to be the first commission to enable it to be embedded in future phases of development. The initial first phase of development offers 3 sites for wayfinding markers and an artist will be invited to develop a plan for future markers and locations also - up to 15 locations in total.