

# London Borough of Brent

## Arts Commissioning Strategy

### Contents

1. Introduction
2. Scope: the where, what, when and how
3. Strategic influences
4. The Arts Development Team
5. Priority art forms
6. Immediate priorities: 2012, Civic Centre, Willesden Green
7. Commissioning framework
8. Action Plan

### 1. Introduction

The Art Commissioning Strategy is a crucial opportunity to showcase the diversity, ambition and energy of Brent as a source of pride and celebration. This strategy proposes **five key objectives** for the commissioning programme. Not all will be supported by every commission, but the programme as a whole will aim to support these objectives and each commission will be asked to show performance against at least one of these objectives.

- *Promoting excellence*
- *Promoting participation*
- *Promoting the practice of local practitioners*
- *Growing audiences*
- *Improving the public realm*

### 2. Where, when, why: the scope of this document

2.1 There are fundamentally three parts to commissioning art works in the next three years. Although the priorities, strategic context and other issues are shared, these three parts have distinct pressures, time constraints, funding opportunities and expectations:

- *London Games 2012*: as part of celebrating the games, a great deal of work has already been done to commission work around the Games including a torch relay community engagement project, Big Dance 2012 and a partnership project with English National Ballet.
- *Civic Centre (CC) and Willesden Green Library Centre (WGLC)* – both of these major new buildings need their own specific programming and curation.
- *Arts programming* – includes all other venues and events/opportunities after the Games in 2012.

2.2 There is a wide range of occasions when the Council will be commissioning new work:

- Major new developments where art is to be provided according to s106/CIL obligations
- Important civic occasions, including opening CC and WGLC
- Celebrations and events
- Activities initiated by others in Brent where the Council has a regulatory and/or partnership role
- Other opportunities initiated by Arts Development Team

2.3 The aim of this document is to ensure that this wide range of opportunities share certain key elements, in particular:

- A clear relationship to the priorities articulated in the strategic framework
- The highest standards of governance, funding and project management to promote artistic excellence and cultural participation

### 3. Strategic influences

#### 3.1 Arts Council

The Arts Council's 2010 strategy: *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* argues for excellence, founded on diversity and innovation, and a new collaborative spirit to develop the arts over the long term, so they truly belong to everyone. It believes there is more we can do together to nurture and champion talented artists and promote England as an international artistic centre. It commits Arts Council England (ACE) to working even harder to support the organisations and artists it funds, deepening the value and impact of their work.

With its focus on long-term collaborative action, the strategic framework will enable ACE to work with partners towards positive change in the arts. It provides the rationale for investment in the arts and will inform future funding decisions.

The strategy seeks the following outcomes:

- **excellence**  
outstanding art and outstanding art experiences
- **reach**  
more people attending and taking part in the arts
- **engagement**  
more people feeling that the arts are meaningful to them
- **diversity**  
the arts reflecting the diversity of contemporary England
- **innovation**  
artists and organisations having the freedom, and being challenged, to innovate

#### 3.2. Cultural Strategy

In the Cultural Strategy for Brent, adopted in 2010, the Culture, Sports and Learning Forum adopted eight key principles to guide its work. These are:

- Enhancing cultural vibrancy – Brent’s infrastructure
- Supporting the cultural economy – arts, culture and creative industries
- Raising the profile of culture – promotion
- Encouraging young people to take part – participation and engagement
- Developing public space – design and animation
- Making the most of London 2012 and other major events – place making
- Increasing participation – access
- Promoting health and well-being – use of parks and open spaces

The key aim of the Culture, Sports and Learning Forum is to develop and support a range of cultural opportunities that are engaging, accessible and enriching for all local communities.

It can be seen that a vibrant, accessible and excellent approach to commissioning will support several of these principles

### 3.3. **Brent’s Arts Development Strategy 2011 - 2015**

There are four priorities in this strategy, one of which is to commission and promote art. Another is supporting regeneration and infrastructure investment, with particular reference to Willesden Green Library Centre and the Civic Centre. Within this context, there are three key elements of the strategy adopted in July 2011:

- The strategy requires the Arts Development Team to *create a structured programme of commissioning artists to both create art and animate public spaces with performance. The Council is already a significant patron of the arts due to the extensive regeneration of the borough in recent years. The team will continue that work, enhancing the environment for residents and visitors and promoting Brent as a vibrant cultural centre. The council will be looking to encourage and promote the best of Brent talent in the arts as well as bringing prestigious artists into the borough.*
- The importance of engagement, as the levels of cultural participation in Brent are stubbornly low. New, exciting art works that both invite participation through the making and audience development, and which reflect the particular communities and experiences of Brent are part of building that engagement
- The explicit plan set out in the strategy, of which the first goal is commissioning and promoting art:

| Arts Vision, priorities  |   | Arts Goals   |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Commissioning and promoting art</b></p> <p>The council is a significant patron of the arts through the commissioning of works in new building developments (often called reward funding). This is key to promoting Brent as a vibrant cultural centre and enhancing the environment for everyone. Given the scale of developments, especially at Wembley, we will be keen to see more performance work as well, animating our public spaces and inspiring people to see their borough in new ways.</p> |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop and implement a council wide standard template for the commissioning of any and all public art across the borough, focusing on common key assessment criteria which align with the council's wider priorities and agendas.</li> <li>2. Develop the "soft infrastructure" of the Brent based artists and partnerships with clear links to Council outcomes and the principles of Brent's Cultural Strategy.</li> <li>3. Develop a capacity building programme whereby local artists who are keen to tender for commissions understand and are skilled up to tender successfully</li> <li>4. Develop new methods of communicating arts practice in the borough including open studios and other similar schemes.</li> <li>5. Provide and promote a range of accessible opportunities for direct participation in the arts by Brent's residents.</li> </ol> |

### 3.4. Planning framework

The Council has successfully used planning-gain resources to promote artistic endeavour, for example through the s106 funded James Hopkins work outside IKEA, or the pop-up studios at South Kilburn. However, there is not a specific policy about the creation of public art across the borough within the planning guidelines.

However, the Wembley Masterplan 2009 has as one of its ambitions:

*The quality of public art proposed for Wembley should be of the highest standards, created by recognised and accomplished artists and, where possible, nurturing emerging local talent. The art could reflect the ambition and aspiration of the community in Wembley and replicate the high design standards expected of the built environment.*

*There should be one significant permanent art work or installation within each district. This could take the form of a single large piece, or alternatively a number of linked, smaller scale interventions into the public realm*

In order to achieve these ambitions, there is a need for a co-ordinated public art strategy across the borough which can be a key part of any development plans. A One Council approach to public art, with a clear governance structure, would remove

the risk of fragmentation and lack of connectivity between the council departments responsible for commissioning, installing and maintaining public art.

### 3.5. **Place based strategies**

There are several strategies adopted by the Council which inter-connect with commissioning, particularly for work outside. These should be considered where relevant to a specific commission. Examples include:

- Area action plans, such as the emerging AAP for Wembley. This may place constraints on development, require, encourage and/or fund commissions, set constraints on how sites might be used, offer opportunities for culturally-based temporary land use or other elements.
- The PlaceMaking Guide which steers elements of the public realm, and with which public art should interlink. This is not to make artistic outcomes subservient to the standard design parameters, but to ensure that the levels of quality and materials used in (permanent) commissions are consistent with the Council's standards.
- Land-related strategies, notably the Parks Strategy which sets out some of the expectations of the use of parks which will be relevant to installations, events and performances, and long-term maintenance.
- Management strategies around events in the public realm, where the Council as commissioner sits alongside the work of the council to ensure safe and enjoyable events and activities.

### 3.6. **Other related strategies**

Many other objectives and strategies of the Council can be served by or in turn support the work of commissioning. The Arts development Strategy itself specifically refers to and prioritises:

- Regeneration, through the importance given to the two major projects at the WGLC and the Civic Centre
- Support for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games which represent an important commissioning opportunity in their own right
- Economic development, particularly through support to cultural and creative industries in the borough and growing the creative practice of individual practitioners, in which the methodology of commissioning plays an important role

In addition, a number of other strategies are important relationships. These include:

- Educational strategies, including building work and partnerships with schools to encourage confident cultural expression and promote the talents of Brent's young people.
- Heritage work to promote the history of the people of Brent, and inspire new work that recognises the complex background and heritage of the Borough's residents

## 4. The Arts Development Team

4.1 A core role for the Arts Development Team overall is to:

- Commission art works and installations associated with events, new developments etc
- To commission them in accordance with this strategy, the Arts Development Strategy and other objectives including ensuring sound project management
- To maintain a diary of events and opportunities
- To work with partners, including colleagues elsewhere in the council, to ensure that the Council maximises opportunities for high quality artistic commissions and does so in a way which maximises participation and professional growth for creative practitioners in the borough
- To grow knowledge about funding, curators, artists and organisations that will support the Councils commissioning activities
- To build both audiences and participation from local communities
- To ensure art commissions are properly evaluated and lessons learnt

4.2. This task based list, useful though it is, cannot adequately identify the job of Arts Development in leading the Council in a commitment to *excellent, participatory and celebratory* art commissioning. Many other parts of the Council have an interest in this work: regeneration and planning, community engagement and events, schools and education, health and wellbeing. All of those approaches are essentially utility based – with important objectives of place making and capacity building. It is for Arts Development Team to lead the commitment to the *quality of the artwork* itself even while making sure the process and outcomes support those other aims.

4.3. The importance of excellence, the openness to innovation and creativity, is fundamental to a successful, long-term creation of artworks, whether permanent installations, performance events or anything in between.

## 5. Priority Art-forms

5.1 Brent is rich in a wide variety of art-forms, from carnival to literature. Any and all of these are worthy of support. However, the Council recognises that, with very limited resources, commissioning excellent new work is best served by focussing expertise, time and capacity into certain art forms. This is not to say that others will not be supported, but that in looking to commission work, these will be the first art forms to be considered.

5.2 In identifying priority art forms, the Council has considered the following issues:

- Spread of participation and activity, insofar as it is measured through cultural, school and faith-based activity

- Centres of excellence in the borough whether in the cultural field or through other routes
- The council's own strategic activities, interventions and investments in cultural activity where it wishes to develop use of its own services
- Potential or existing partnerships which will enhance cultural activity and commissioning
- Potential competition or dilution of the Brent value for commissioning investment because of particularly strong activity in neighbouring areas
- Foreseeable opportunities for commissioning given the future around key civic buildings, known planning –gain opportunities, national strategies etc

5.3 This analysis has led to the prioritisation of three art-forms in particular:

- Literature
- Performance arts
- Visual arts

#### 5.4 *Literature*

The Council is strongly committed to a dynamic, accessible and wide-ranging library service, and aims to promote access to reading and literature. Storytelling in different languages and different forms – from oral to digital - is a fundamental way of building links between different communities, sharing and enriching experience.

#### 5.5 *Performance arts*

Brent has a wealth of performing arts within the borough, including dance, drama and music. Dance offers an important way to celebrate different histories and experiences. Brent is home to many communities with a rich dance culture, from the Brazilian samba to Indian kathakali. Drama, also strong in the borough is celebrated through a number of drama and script-based performance organisations who work with a range of age groups. In addition carnival arts are also strong within the borough.

#### 5.6 *Visual arts*

There is a wide range of visual arts experience and practice in Brent, including art galleries and artist studios. In addition the borough also has an increasing number of public art installations.

### **6. Immediate priorities: Civic Centre and Willesden Green**

The first task of the Arts Commissioning Officer (appointed February 2012), will be the drawing up of initial plans for the programming of Brent's new Civic Centre.

There will also be an unmissable opportunity to shape the design of the new cultural centre at Willesden Green, with an eye to the future cultural programme. A key element of this will be the animation of the outside space.

6.1 The priorities for the cultural content of the **Civic Centre** are:

- to **showcase Brent** and promote pride in the borough, and
- to **celebrate communities** through, for example, school and college exhibitions.

In devising a programme, therefore, the commissioners will need to ensure the briefs will generate proposals that

- support participation from a wide range of communities
- give opportunities to see, celebrate and participate in work of a high standard of excellence
- respond to the built form and symbolic importance of the new centre
- provide opportunities for local practitioners to showcase their work and build their practice

There are also commercial imperatives for the Civic Centre that should inform the thinking about the animation programme, showcasing the Centre as a prestige venue for events (conferences, meetings, weddings etc), contributing to its marketing and revenue requirements.

It will be important to highlight the new library in the building alongside the many other public services to be based there, as it will be the first new one to open. This suggests that *literature* will be an important art-form for the opening events.

The new Civic Centre is expected to open in June 2013. In the lead up to the opening there will need to be a programmed series of events and activities, incorporating work with schools, community organisations, cultural partners and others.

It is strongly suggested that the Council does not seek 'blank sheet of paper' proposals for the opening but designs an approach around a set theme or themes and then invites proposals for both curation and then participation.

The Civic Centre will have an active programme of commercial letting; the Board has agreed the principle that arts events will not be charged rent, so the foregone space hire rates will constitute an element of match funding. There is a small budget set aside for the Civic Centre opening, otherwise the emphasis will be on securing external grants and sponsorship. This will be a key role of the Arts Development Team.

## 6.2 Priorities for the cultural animation of **Willesden Green** cultural centre are:

- to **support local practitioners** through giving opportunities to promote work and
- to **grow audiences** through activities like reading groups, taster sessions and community food markets.

In devising a programme, therefore, the commissioners will need to ensure the brief will generate proposals that:

- provide opportunities for local practitioners to show case their work and build their practice
- give opportunities to see, celebrate and participate in work of a high standard of excellence
- respond to the built form of the new centre and open up the relationship with the High Road

WGLC is planned to open by (at the latest) March 2014. On this occasion, it may be appropriate to see 'blank sheet of paper proposals' once the detailed built form is agreed.

There is again, no funding specifically for this programming work.

The WGLC will have a limited programme of commercial letting; the Board has agreed the principle that arts events will not be charged rent, so the foregone space hire rates will constitute an element of match funding.

Once the detailed design is agreed, so that the nature of the spaces and infrastructure are clear the planning for opening events and later programmes can begin.

*Arts Development Team, December 2011*