

Artist Commission, Harlow 2018-19

Introduction

For ten years Essex Cultural Diversity Project (ECDP) has been working closely with many different organisations, bringing together artists, museums, libraries, performers and writers with local authorities and commissioners to significantly improve and enhance the artistic and cultural diversity of the area, ensure that excellence is thriving, and that cultural integration and understanding is supported and enhanced through arts and cultural activity. This is more important today than it has ever been since ECDP was established.

ECDP is now an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) with a key role to play across Essex and the East of England in continuing to support diversity in arts and cultural practice. Our key strategy to achieve this is through a programme of exciting but challenging place-based commissions for artists to work in areas of Essex where there are opportunities to explore diversity through their practice. For 2018-19 we are focusing on five towns/places where community engagement in the arts has been traditionally low – Canvey Island, Harlow, Basildon, Grays and Jaywick Sands. Harlow is the focus of this commission.

The Harlow Commission is being undertaken in partnership with Essex County Council and Harlow Art Trust.

Harlow Town Introduction

Harlow is a large town in the north west of Essex close to Hertfordshire border with a population of over 80,000, built as one of a number of New Towns after World War II to ease overcrowding in London. The masterplan for the new town was drawn up by Sir Frederick Gibberd and included housing for around 60,000 people to the west of an existing Essex village called Harlow. The masterplan also included the villages of Tye Green, Churchgate Street, Great Parndon, Latton, Potter Street and Netteswell, as well as provision for two large industrial areas.

Harlow's population has grown over recent years (as has many of Essex's towns), and is projected to grow further. It is predicted that the population will reach 96,000 by 2033. The town has a fairly young population, with more under-sixteens and fewer pensioners than the national average, although the number of pensioners in Harlow is growing and the town is becoming more ethnically diverse with currently around 16 per cent of Harlow's population coming from black or minority ethnic groups and this is expected to grow.

Although Harlow is not one of the most deprived towns in Essex, it does have areas of relative deprivation as well as areas of greater affluence. Harlow is recognised as an area with a relatively low engagement with arts and culture and currently has no Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). There are however areas of arts and craft activity centred around Parndon Mill (studios), Gatehouse Arts (arts studios in the centre of town), the Gibberd Gallery, Harlow Playhouse and Razed Roof (a performing arts group for people with and without learning difficulties and disabilities).

Given the town's location it relates as much to Hertfordshire and London as it does to the rest of Essex, and there is a significant industrial sector that employs people from across the wider area. The Council is overseeing an ambitious regeneration and economic growth strategy that is underpinned by the 2011 announcement of the creation of Harlow Enterprise Zone, now occupying a strategically important site between Cambridge and London, offering opportunities for significant hi-tech business development and growth. Harlow was the birthplace of fibre optics with the fibre optic cable being invented at STC (latterly Nortel) by George Hockham and Sir Charles Kao, for which they won the Nobel Prize for Science.

The Vision for Harlow as set out in the original masterplan by Sir Fredrick Gibberd very much recognised the importance of open space and good quality contemporary design, with the role of public art being seen as central. Gibberd not only designed Harlow – he also lived in the town he designed. He received many honours and awards in recognition of his life's work, most notably a CBE in 1954 followed by a Knighthood in 1967. A strong legacy of Gibberd's vision is the public sculpture collection now comprising of over 80 pieces. In 2010 Harlow was officially recognised as a 'Sculpture Town' with the collection winning a Special Commendation from the Marsh Awards for Excellence in Public Sculpture in 2011. The majority of the collection is owned by Harlow Art Trust, which has acquired and commissioned works since 1953, with other pieces being owned by Harlow Council. The collection dates back to the 1950s and sculpture has become part of the natural surroundings.

<http://www.gibberdgallery.co.uk/images/harlow-sculpture-map/Harlow%20Sculpture%20Map.pdf>

Harlow Art Trust

Harlow Art Trust (HAT) is a registered charity and wholly voluntary organisation, formed in 1953 to beautify the town by commissioning, purchasing, siting and maintaining public art. HAT continues to follow the ethos of the new town's visionary leader Frederick Gibberd who believed strongly in the arts. He along with five volunteers chaired by Sir Philip Hendy (National Gallery) began the collection to improve the aesthetics for migrants living in this new area, mostly from war torn London. Specifically HAT has four main objectives as an organisation:

- To maintain the collection to the highest standard
- To communicate this heritage through a strong volunteer base
- To respond knowledgably and professionally to public requests and loans
- To deliver relevant and informative exhibitions

As a not-for-profit charity with no core funding, investment is secured from a number of sources mainly relating to the delivery of specific projects, and HAT has developed some strong partnerships with organisations including local schools, Harlow Council, Harlow College, Historic England and the 20th Century Society.

Since 2012 HAT has also managed the Gibberd Gallery, a permanent location for the 20th Century Watercolour collection delivering an annual sculpture show and an exciting programme of exhibitions that meet local and national interest. The work of HAT, the Gibberd Gallery and the Sculpture collection supports the local economy and encourages cultural tourism from across the wider area.

HAT is currently developing a project for 2019 – *Access Harlow Sculpture Town* which will focus on conserving 18 of the most vulnerable pieces in the collection and will create new interpretation and learning resources engaging school children, volunteers, local residents and visitors with the sculpture collection.

There is significant work underway currently to consider how Harlow brands itself as a place and destination. Harlow Council has recently commissioned *Thinking Place* consultancy to support the process of moving on from the 'New Town' image, instead looking to reflect a modern, dynamic place of

growth and opportunity. Harlow Council has now launched the new site 'Discover Harlow' (www.discoverharlow.co.uk) and is keen to explore three key themes that are seen as defining Harlow's story – Colour, Culture and Sculpture. This Vision was launched in June 2018. The Council is also undertaking an Area Action Plan for the Town Centre with a key outcome being 'A strong cultural offer which is supported by residents and visitors to the town centre'. With more than 30 sculptures in the town centre alone, HAT recognises that there is a significant opportunity not only to restore some of these works but also to potentially re-curate them as part of a regeneration strategy for the town centre. This provides some important context for this ECDP commission.

The Commission

ECDP has a key role to explore the concept of 'diversity' across Essex, working with a wide range of partners and providing opportunities for artists and creative practitioners from diverse background and contexts. Through our commissioning programme ECDP aims to support the production of challenging work that responds to specific places and the local context (place-based), as well as reflecting on national themes and issues around diversity.

Harlow is one of the 30 local authorities in England and Wales with the highest proportion of eastern European nationals, according to Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures. One in 17 residents are from Eastern Europe. Harlow Council through its Community Engagement Strategy (2013-16) *'recognises growth in the diversity of its communities and prepares for the changes and challenges that this will undoubtedly bring. The Council needs, and wants, to be able to engage positively with people of all ages, from all social and ethnic backgrounds.....The Council wants to work with local people and external partners to strengthen relationships between people from different ethnic backgrounds and faiths.'*

Harlow is not exceptional in terms of the diversity of its resident population, but the Council recognises that the town is changing and ageing and that positive action should be taken to support community relations. ECDP wants to support local partners in this respect and recognises the unique role that the arts and culture can play in exploring issues relevant to diversity, taking on difficult and challenging subjects while engaging audiences, participants and volunteers.

For this commission ECDP is keen to make the most of our partnership with HAT, and this means supporting the commissioned artist or artists to engage with HAT and the sculpture collection. Despite the public nature of the collection there is recognition amongst local partners that more needs to be done to engage local communities and encourage younger people in particular to recognise and value its place in the town's heritage and culture. While ECDP recognises the value and importance of the Sculpture Collection to Harlow, we also understand it is challenging to get everyone to recognise and value public art and sculpture, particularly when it is located within the public realm. We expect the commissioned artist to take on this particular challenge and achieve/undertake the following:

- Work closely with local partners including HAT/Gibberd Gallery to identify particular opportunities to explore pieces in the public sculpture collection in new ways, perhaps researching the context, history and location
- Engage with Harlow Art Trust/Gibberd Gallery to explore their aspiration for Harlow Sculpture Town 2019, and in particular their plans for a Sculpture Week and programme of improvements/repairs to a number of sculptures
- Working with local partners to identify particular challenges and opportunities relating to the town's increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, reflecting on Harlow's 'New Town' identity and the history of migration as well as the current plans to develop its 'brand'
- Work with at least one defined local BAME community group (and ideally more than one), including running a series of workshops encouraging active participation, develop new work

based on the challenges and opportunities identified. We would expect to see around 10 people volunteering their time supported by the commissioned artist.

- Working with local partners, display/present the work in a publicly accessible location and format engaging audiences both in public and online. Both HAT and the owners of the Water Gardens are keen to see this particular Town Centre space utilised for engaging people in public art/performance. The viability of this very much depends upon the creative response to this brief.
- Engage with the concept of the 'Creative Case for Diversity' throughout the commission (ECDP is happy to discuss this with the commissioned artists as part of its ongoing work)
- Ensure that outcomes are monitored to support the reporting process back to the Arts Council

HAT are also keen to explore the concept of developing a new creative space for Harlow Town Park – potentially reinvigorating an abandoned post-war concrete building. This can be explored in more detail with HAT should the appointed artist be keen to develop this theme.

There is no imperative to propose solutions for improving Harlow as a place (socially, culturally or economically). However, the commissioned artist should seek to understand and engage with current and future regeneration and development plans where possible.

How this commission is undertaken, which art form and which community groups are engaged – ECDP and its partners are open and would like to keep the opportunity as free as possible to encourage creative exploration.

Support throughout the Commission

The commissioned artist can count on the ongoing support, advocacy and advice of the ECDP Creative Director throughout, as well as other ECDP staff/associates as necessary. The team at Harlow Art Trust/Gibberd Gallery are not managing the commission directly but are happy to liaise with the commissioned artist in terms of local contacts, information and partnerships.

ECDP staff will liaise with the commissioned artist to establish a timetable for delivery and identify times for recording digitally the ongoing creative process (this is as important for ECDP as the final outcomes in terms of understanding community engagement with the process).

Budget and Promotion

The budget available for the commission is £10,000 (to include any VAT). This will cover artist fee, travel and materials. The need for promotion, advertising and web resources can be discussed with ECDP, therefore we do not expect the £10,000 to cover anything related this.

Promotion for the commission can be undertaken in partnership with ECDP and other partners as appropriate. ECDP will promote the commission and related activity on the ECDP website and support the process throughout on social media. ECDP hopes that the commission will attract significant numbers from the local community both in terms of active engagement and audience, as well as attracting audiences from further afield (where possible/appropriate). ECDP and its partners would expect to see good levels of audiences online (not necessarily exclusively during the actual commission).

Funding must be committed and claimed from ECDP prior to April 2019.

Commission Panel

A small Harlow Commission Panel has been established to oversee the commission. This includes representatives from ECDP, Essex CC, Harlow Art Trust/Gibberd Gallery, and one local community group. At approximately half-way through the commission, and at the end of the commission, the artist should expect to meet with the panel to discuss progress and/or process of reflection on the outcomes achieved.

Responding to this ECDP Commission Opportunity

Please respond via email to jo@essexcdp.com including the following:

- Outline artistic and community engagement concept for the commission, including the proposed community engagement process and what art form(s) will be the focus
- CV with relevant previous commissions and work (no more than 4 sides of A4). Please provide links to relevant websites and social media/media
- Outline budget breakdown showing how you would utilise the £10,000 and approximate timeline for the work. It is important that all of the funded work takes place within the 2018-19 financial year, so please be clear on availability and resources to complete the commission in time

Please ensure that proposals are received by 23.59 on 21 September 2018 – Please send them to jo@essexcdp.com

Interviews will be on Monday 1 October 2018 – Interviews will include an opportunity for a 15-minute presentation on your proposal. If you are shortlisted for an interview we will let you know by the 25 September 2018.

Please note, if your application is not shortlisted in this instance we will not be able to provide feedback due to the number of applications. Shortlisted applicants will be notified and invited to the interviews by 25 September.

For further information on Essex Cultural Diversity Project visit www.essexcdp.com

