



Call for Proposals Artist Commission 2025: Lavenham Guildhall

Essex Cultural Diversity Project and the National Trust invite proposals from creative practitioners for a new commission responding to Lavenham Guildhall, a National Trust site in Suffolk. The Guildhall is of great historical significance, emphasised by its location within this renowned historical wool town, and today is enjoyed by around 25,000 visitors per year, as well as featuring as the backdrop to numerous films.

We are looking for a project that can connect the past, present and future of the Guildhall; one which recognises the significance of the building's unique history; explores its current relevance to the local context and can engage both existing and potential communities; and a project that can help articulate shared visions for the future.

We are interested in creative explorations as to what people connect with and value about the Guildhall's story, its present place within the community, and how we can grow, reshape or nurture connections to give the Guildhall a meaningful future in people's lives.

The commission is an opportunity to explore the National Trust's role as a national institution and how this very often overlaps with its hyper-local relationships in places such as Lavenham. We'd like proposals to consider how the Trust can continue to engage productively with communities within Lavenham, strengthen its role as a good neighbour, and reach out further to engage new and diverse audiences of all ages.

This is an opportunity for us to learn and reflect on the significance of heritage buildings and their associated social, economic and cultural stories as being core to local identities and sense of place. Throughout this commission we want to be challenged and to ask the question – 'What is the purpose of the Guildhall now and in the future?'

Budget: £10,000
Deadline: Tuesday 10 June
Interviews: Monday 30 June

Commission Start Date/Induction: July 2025
Audience Engagement Activity to take place from August to December 2025
Output on site if appropriate to proposal Oct/Nov/Dec 2025
Commission End date/final report: Jan/Feb 2026

FULL COMMISSION BRIEF

About the Guildhall

Built c1529-30, the Guildhall and the two adjoining properties dominate the south side of Lavenham's medieval Market Place at the heart of this remarkably well-preserved village. Adjoining the Guildhall is 1 Lady Street, which was built c1500-20 and completes the complex of buildings in National Trust ownership. The origins of the Guildhall and the wealth that formed Lavenham itself can be found in medieval times. At this time England's wealth was largely built on the success of its high-quality wool and cloth industry. Much of the production was exported, which brought enormous tax revenues to the Crown, as well as making wealthy men out of merchants, many of whom lived and operated out of Lavenham.

The Guildhall was the purpose-built meeting place of the most exclusive of Lavenham's five medieval religious guilds, the Guild of Corpus Christi. These guilds were not like merchants' guilds, concerned with the organisation of trade. Their purpose was instead to save the souls of their members by funding priests to commemorate the dead in their prayers and by the singing of masses. Lavenham Guildhall was only a religious 'Guildhall' for 20 years, with many other uses over the centuries including being split into cottages, a bridewell (house of correction), a workhouse (earlier and different to the notorious Victorian workhouses), a chapel, a school, restaurant, youth club, museum and a community space for meetings, events and social gatherings. The survival of the fragile structures into the 21st century, despite periods of near dereliction, is testament to their significance to local residents.

For more history relating to the Guildhall and Lavenham, visit <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/lavenham-guildhall>

The Commission

Essex Cultural Diversity Project and the National Trust are working together to broaden access to inclusive and diverse arts, culture and heritage across the Trust's Essex and Suffolk Countryside portfolio of properties, of which Lavenham Guildhall is one.

The National Trust has hosted five commissions to date as part of Essex Cultural Diversity Project's Arts Council England NPO commissioning programme, which provides an opportunity for creative practitioners to create new work, explore diversity and develop their socially engaged and participatory practices. Projects aim to capture the spirit of place, and connect with diverse and local communities.

2026 will be the 75th anniversary of the National Trust's involvement with the Guildhall. Taking on responsibility for this historic property followed decades of locally-led work to save and restore the Guildhall as a local asset that has been at the centre of the village for 100s of years, playing many different roles. The local community retains a key role and interest through a committee of 12 residents who advise the Trust on running the building. There is also a small museum sub-committee who curate an annual exhibition in the Community Room on the first floor and assist the Trust with caring for the collections on display. Many of the objects on display in the show rooms are in the care of the Lavenham Exhibition and Museum Trust (LEMT).

For 500 years the role of the Guildhall and its adjacent buildings have reflected the needs of the people of Lavenham. The myriad of uses to which they have been put, and the continuous involvement of the community, have ensured that the buildings have not only survived, but are cherished as a remarkable symbol of the history of the village. As the National Trust approaches 75 years of responsibility for the buildings, now is a good time to ask questions about the future.

For this commission we are specifically looking for a project that will not only recognise the significance of this building's unique history, but also explore its relevance to the local context, communities and village of Lavenham and the surrounding area. This commission is an opportunity to explore the National Trust's role as national institution and how this very often overlaps with its hyper-local relationships in places such as Lavenham. This will include considering how the Trust can continue to engage productively with communities within Lavenham, while also seeking to reach out further to engage new and diverse audiences of all ages. Lavenham itself has seen significant change

over the years and will continue to evolve in the years to come - changing demographics and work practices, and issues relating to largely rural economies in the 21st century (with heritage and tourism ever more important).

This commission is an opportunity to learn and reflect on the significance of heritage buildings and their associated social, economic and cultural stories as being core to local identities and sense of place, as well as representing opportunities and imperatives to evolve and remain broadly relevant beyond the local context and communities.

Throughout the commission we want to be challenged and to ask the question – ‘What is the purpose of the Guildhall now and in the future?’ and ‘What is the National Trust’s role?’ both in relation to Lavenham as a historic rural village, and as a national charity with a new strategy that emphasises increased and diverse engagement with the National Trust’ properties and landscapes.

Key objectives of this commission are to:

1. Connect with the local community through celebrating human experiences and stories that both the Guildhall and wider village have to share - engaging with harder to reach groups will be key here. Not all local communities are part of, or indeed aware of, the committees responsible for liaising with the National Trust.
2. Raise awareness of the ‘free access’ that Lavenham village residents have to the Guildhall through the community pass.
3. Explore what local communities feel about the Guildhall now and what they would like to see in the future – asking questions about its changing role in relation to the identity of Lavenham and what kinds of involvement local people want now and, in the future,
4. Seek to engage diverse communities from outside of Suffolk, thinking about different views of heritage buildings such as the Guildhall and what this might mean for future engagement strategies, events and heritage interpretation.
5. Explore relevant themes informed by research and engagement, producing new work that enables the National Trust, ECDP and local communities to critically explore approaches to managing, interpreting and developing programmes in the future.

As part of the commission, we would like the appointed creative practitioner(s) to work with at least three local community or voluntary organisations and engage volunteers in developing the work of the commission. It is important that the artistic process creates opportunities for people to learn new skills, gain confidence and have enjoyable experiences. We are keen to see significant engagement with local communities and, where possible, visitors.

Space is available at Lavenham Guildhall so we would be happy to see some activity take place there, bringing people into the space (through visits, workshops, an exhibition or performance for example).

How to Respond to this Opportunity

We accept **written**, **verbal** and **video** proposals for this commission. Video proposals should be no longer than 10 minutes in length.

To apply, please email your proposal to jo@essexcdp.com by midnight Tuesday 10 June and include the following:

- An outline of the artistic concept and its creative starting points, your project title, intended participants and any groups you may like to work with (if known), and your community engagement process (no more than 600 words).
- How your practice and project explores or promotes diversity (no more than 200 words).
- Some info about you and your work. This could be a short biography/artist statement with examples of previous work / a PDF portfolio / a CV / links to your website and social media.
- A short, estimated and basic budget outline, showing how you would utilise the £10,000 (we suggest 4-6 lines)
- A short approximate timeline for the work (we suggest 4-6 lines with key milestones)
- A completed Commissioning Monitoring Form - <https://bit.ly/ecdp-commissions2025-6> (please note on some computers this document goes direct to your downloads folder once clicked)

Further Support & Accessibility

It is highly recommended that you visit the **ECDP Commissions Frequently Asked Questions** page at <https://essexcdp.com/commissionfaqs-lavenham> which has supporting information and practical advice to support you in putting a proposal together.

We are committed to making our application process accessible, and can be adaptable to your needs. We welcome proposals in various formats, such as a written, video or audio proposals, or via a recorded Zoom call.

If you would like to talk this brief through or need further information about the commission, we'd be very happy to offer a 1-2-1 to support you and answer your questions. Please email Jo on jo@essexcdp.com to arrange a meeting.

To request a text / audio / large print version of this brief, contact Jo at jo@essexcdp.com

Crucial Links

- Commission call out: <https://essexcdp.com/commission/lavenham>
- Commission FAQs: <https://essexcdp.com/commissionfaqs-lavenham>
- People and nature thriving: National Trust's strategy to 2035
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/our-strategy>
- Lavenham Guildhall: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/lavenham-guildhall>
- About Essex Cultural Diversity Project: <https://essexcdp.com/>
- ECDP Commissions: <https://essexcdp.com/commissions/>