

ArtSpine Project – Artists Brief

Issue Date : 8th July 2024

We are seeking Expressions of Interest from artists/ arts organisation or designer to lead on an exciting public art project in the wonderful town of Watlington, Oxfordshire.

Project Context

Watlington lies at the foot of the Chiltern Hills escarpment overlooked by its famous triangular chalk mark. It has many springs and an internationally rare chalk stream which allowed the expansion of watercress beds and a now-disused railway line which took the cress to the London markets. There are many green spaces both managed for leisure and wildlife by the parish and volunteers. Walkers and other outdoor enthusiasts find the town a welcoming gateway to the Chilterns.

Reputedly England's smallest town, Watlington has its origins dating back to the 6th century, the proximity of the Neolithic Icknield Way (Ridgeway National trail), civil war connections, and mention in the Domesday Book. The recent discovery of Viking treasure known as the Watlington Hoard alludes to earlier history of the settlement and its old byways. The listed brick 17th century Town Hall is surrounded by characterful older half-timbered and Georgian buildings, in the historic centre as well as the mediaeval church of St Leonard's. There are many specialist shops, pubs, small businesses, and great hospitality, which make it a draw for visitors of all types. For a town of under 3000 people, it has an unusually large population of artists and artisans – 100 or more, and is a cultural hub for many other creative activities such as theatre, music and dance. There are two schools and a broad range of age groups and interests, with community-run groups and events. The Town has become well known for its annual ArtWeeks art trail proving very popular due to the number of exhibitors and studios that can be seen in one place. The artsHUB is a recently formed organisation with a permanent base in the town running workshops, talks and exhibitions to support the local art community.

Home-building is increasingly a part of the necessary development of Watlington, being situated in the Thames Valley, close to London, and recently several new housing allocations to the west of the town have been, or are to be built, giving the opportunity and budget (through section 106 and CIL money) for the development of the town's network of paths, public art and the greater integration of established and new communities.

To this end a steering group comprising parish councillors, the developers, the District arts advisor and artists, proposed a significant public art project consisting of a walking route made of existing paths and spaces which has been named the 'ArtSpine' to unite new and old parts of the town through a themed art-enhanced walking route.

The ArtSpine Brief

This public art project will create an ArtSpine that connects the new developments to the west to the Town Centre via a pedestrian friendly route and establishes Watlington's strong artistic tradition as the backbone of the town.

The ArtSpine project aims to:

- Signposts the connection from the new housing sites to the town centre and encourages residents to walk into the centre
- Increase local distinctiveness and have a positive impact on old and the new community identities.
- Enhance public realm and residents' enjoyment of the town's spaces on their doorsteps.
- Build visual and social connections between new housing area residents and those of the town as well as strengthening relationships within the developments
- Act as a showcase for local artists and community projects.

This public procurement will appoint a "lead artist" (which could be an individual or collective) to deliver the permanent works and the empty plinths. The lead artist will be required to involve the thriving local arts community and schools in the project.

The Spine will include:

- Significant works of art/ landmark sculptures at the "start points": Red Kite View, Hampden Fields and Hill Road Car Park
- Two other major works at St Leonard's Church and Mansle Gardens
- 4 or 5 "empty plinths"/ opportunities for temporary display of artwork that will signpost the route. These will be designed to mount 2D or 3D works of art by local artists as a rotating exhibition
- An interpretive board at the Town Hall giving an overview and map of the Spine
- Additional signposting where required

The following map shows the proposed locations.

Artistic scope & materials

Our lead artist will identify themes and concepts for the final works of art but we are keen to see the works of art celebrate and explore local history and identity of Watlington, the surrounding landscape and a celebration of our natural world. The local arts community are keen to explore the following thematic approaches;

- WATLINGTON: PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE
- WATLINGTON: LANDSCAPE, WILDLIFE AND CLIMATE
- WATLINGTON: COMMUNITY & CONNECTION

The art works must be suitable for an outside environment and minimise ongoing maintenance. Works might include minor enhancements to buildings sculpture, gates and benches. The art works could explore in a variety of materials including wood, ceramics, stone or metalwork. The look and feel of the works of art need to enhance the rural nature of the town. We are mindful of the maintenance demands of wood and would prefer to incorporate more hard-wearing and robust materials such as metal and stone to assist the longevity of the artworks.

Community Engagement

We would like each work of art to have a genuine relationship with the town and local people. Watlington Parish Council will be keen to help the chosen artist make contacts with local groups and schools, to be inspired by local people as well as create ways for local people to engage with the project from the outset.

Watlington is home to a thriving artistic community with 60 artists exhibiting at the largest Oxfordshire ArtWeek event outside Oxford itself. A list of local artists and craftspeople who are interested in being involved is available.

The leads artist will provide regular updates to the Parish Council, local artists and the wider community by attending town events and meetings, and via the town website and newsletter.

Commissioning

Submissions will be evaluated by the ArtSpine Steering Group. The group, appointed by the Parish Council includes local artists, members of Watlington Parish Council and a housing developer representative. The group is advised by the District Council's Arts Development Officer.

Interviews are anticipated to be held in mid-April. The successful artist will be commissioned by Watlington Parish Council in two phases:

1. Research, Collaboration & Design

Based on initial Expressions of Interest, we will appoint a lead artist who will be commissioned to;

- Work closely with the steering group to review the proposed sites
- Meet local artists and craftspeople who have expressed an interest in working on the project and identify opportunities for collaboration
- Engage with community groups, schools and local people
- Research the identify and potential themes of each work
- Identify and design installations for each location.
- Produce and/ or coordinate scaled drawings of designs
- Produce a fully costed budget breakdown an indicative timescale and a schedule of works required

2. Creation and installation of work

Once accepted the lead artist will be commissioned to make and install the works (including the "empty plinths") with costs including all materials, fabrication, transport, installation and subcontracting to local artists / craftspeople. There is also scope for creating a leaflet and map of the trail.

Budget

The total budget for the project is £115,000. We anticipate our lead artist will be commissioned for the research, collaboration and design phase for £7,000 (to cover all associated costs including artist's fees, installation, subcontracting work from local artists and community engagement).

Once proposals are accepted and approved, we will then commission the creation and installation of all the work for the remaining £108,000.

Timescale

This project will be commissioned by Watlington Parish Council with the day to day management of the project overseen by the ArtSpine Steering group and advice from the District Council Arts Development Officer. Key dates we have identified are;

	Key dates
Send Brief to Artists / forums etc.	15th July
Deadline for Expressions of Interest	31 st August
Steering Group review of Eols	5 th September
Interview artists	19 th September
Commission research, collaboration and design phase	w/c 23 rd September
Proposals to be presented.	December 2024
Approval for remaining funding	January – March 2025
Creation of works	March to November 2025
Installation	November 2025

Expression of Interest

We are seeking Expressions of interest at this stage (not full proposals) to be emailed to ArtSpineWatlington@gmail.com by **Saturday 31st August 2024** and should include:

- Examples of previous projects you have worked on
- An artistic statement in response to the brief and your interest in the project
- An indication of your approach and ideas to this opportunity (i.e. what community work would you like to be involved with and the type of artwork you might propose at the next stage of selection and/ or if you would consider collaborating with another artist)
- An indication of your required budget and timescales
- The name and contact details of a previous commissioner

Contact

If you have any queries about the ArtSpine project you can contact the project manager, Steve Bolingbroke, on 07770 817075 or via ArtSpineWatlington@gmail.com.