Planning for Public Art: The role of planners as advocates and allies

On 25 November 2025, UP Projects and Sheppard Robson hosted their second collaborative roundtable event exploring the role that art and artists can play in shaping better places. The discussion was once again moderated by Emma Wilcox. This follow-up event focused specifically on the role that planners can play in being active allies and advocating for embedding more socially engaged public art commissioning into proposed developments. This topic addressed a specific issue highlighted at the first round table event titled Public Art: Not Just a Nice to Have, which highlighted the vital role that planning professionals play as gatekeepers of decision making.

UP Projects kicked off the conversation by reinforcing their approach, which champions the value of process as much as outcomes, and highlighted their emphasis on social practice and how art has the power to deliver significant social value. The conversation brought together planners from local authorities, policymakers, public art specialists, and built environment professionals to explore how planning systems can better champion public art as essential to great places rather than mandate it as an afterthought.

Building on themes discussed at the first roundtable, including the importance of starting public art processes early, challenging object-focused thinking, celebrating diverse community voices, and properly valuing public art's contribution to place-making - this session focused specifically on planning tools and levers that can be used to demarginalise arts and culture.

Power, Agency and Advocacy
The discussion began with an assumption that everyone around the table recognised public art's value. If so, why is it so hard to incorporate? And what tools can help build better outcomes? The group identified that planners hold significant influence, particularly during early pre-application discussions, where they have the greatest influence, well before councillors make decisions at committee. However, planners face competing pressures. Developers are often reluctant to pay more than minimum requirements, typically opting for cheaper options where possible and a focus on housing makes keeping culture on the agenda hard. Meanwhile, political pressure exists to be "development-friendly" whilst securing the best community outcomes. So how do we understand and begin mitigating these competing pressures?

Process Vs Outcomes

A key theme emerged around the disconnect between planning processes and actual development outcomes. One contributor highlighted how "the government's focus is on process rather than outcome, which sometimes can lead us to losing sight of what the developments we are creating actually look and feel like."

Even when developers have good intentions and commission artists to develop art works, outcomes often feel transactional rather than transformative, as they often take place around the launch of the development, rather than over its lifetime. The group identified this as a systemic issue requiring attention to both robust processes and a clear vision for place quality and legacy. Another contributor shared the importance of building trust in process-driven projects with developers, to normalise projects with open outcomes.

Policy: "The Most Important Tool"

One contributor raised that "policy is the most important tool we have." However, significant gaps exist in current frameworks, with many local authorities lacking robust public art policies or relegating cultural considerations to brief mentions alongside other requirements. No mention of arts and culture is embedded within the RIBA framework and it is not mentioned in existing design policy. It was mentioned that with the advent of more local plans, public art and culture is rising on the agenda as it is prioritised by communities who recognise it as important..

The discussion revealed creative approaches to overcoming policy limitations. Planners described using existing policies as vehicles for public art requirements - linking to circular economy initiatives, sustainability targets, or community engagement mandates where stronger frameworks exist.

The conversation explored whether artists could contribute to policy development itself, recognising their expertise in "vision-making and narrative-shaping." This reframes artists not just as makers of objects but as contributors to policy processes who are able to uncover aspects that may otherwise go overlooked. As one contributor suggested: "make art the process."

Communication is Key

Communication emerged as perhaps the most critical factor determining success or failure. The group identified breakdowns at multiple levels: within local authority departments, between planning and policy teams, between councils and developers, and with communities.

The importance of early and ongoing dialogue was emphasised. Discussion highlighted the need to challenge the definition of public art, with many professionals operating with a limited understanding of contemporary practice, defaulting to familiar formats such as murals when considering public art. Planners also raised the importance of facilitating council members to understand projects early on in the process. The idea of using language that clearly articulates the

value of art and artists was highlighted, including making reference to their role as innovators, critical thinkers and the powers the arts have in positively contributing to mental health and wellbeing.

Percent for Art

Learning from contributors' experiences with Percent for Art programmes provided concrete examples of systematic policy support. One participant shared their experience of working with the programme that involves assigning 1% of a development's overall budget to public art, leading to budgets of between £50-500k allocated for public art projects. Though the contribution is now commonplace in Ireland, there is still work to be done by Arts Officers to ensure that colleagues across the various councils know that they can and should apply for it and support can be given to enable them to do so. Colleagues operating within England mentioned that they were keen to explore the percentage for art but they questioned the rationale behind it being 1% of the overall budget and for evidence of the impact of programmes delivered under this scheme.

The group discussed how art programmes should focus on "recognising and engaging with the people who are essential in the community." In areas of deprivation, rather than installing new statues, art projects developed through robust engagement methods can engage with specific social issues, with community relationships developing over prolonged periods of time. One moving example focused resources on working with families impacted by an area's high suicide rate, demonstrating art's capacity to address real community challenges.

Drawing Conclusions: "Making It Hard to Miss"

Emma Wilcox asked each contributor to discuss what they would take away from the conversation and enact in their different roles. Answers ranged from convening professional bodies and adding public art to design review meetings to cultivating better relationships with planners, and even reframing public art as infrastructure. To finish, one contributor spoke about championing public art and how, together, "we can make it hard to miss."

This phrase encapsulated the collective ambition revealed throughout the discussion - to move beyond treating public art as an optional extra toward embedding creative approaches as standard practice in creating great places where communities can thrive. The discussion highlighted a distinct lack of policy around arts, culture and public art that urgently needs addressing to ensure that planners can play an active role to advocate for progressive and socially engaged public art projects. This would enable them to put culture back on the agenda at a time when competing priorities are rife.

Examples shared at the round table were:

- https://www.creativeestuary.com/national-cultural-planning-toolkit/

- https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/business-and-licensing/town-centres/creative-engagement-projects/

- https://worldcitiescultureforum.com/

- https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2023/06/21/manifest-what-we-have-learnt-so-far-from-artists-working-in-policy/