

Welcome back to another series of On The Air, a podcast brought to you by Stonewater. Every month, we'll be bringing you a brand new episode that will explore the role collaboration has in tackling the challenges and opportunities to ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a place they can call home. Host Anisha Patel will be joined by a guest co-host as well as special guests to explore the latest insights and stories from across the social housing sector.

Anisha: Hello and welcome back to another episode of On the Air. I'm really excited about today's chat and the guests we have on the panel because it's been quite a busy few weeks at Stonewater, as some of you who follow us on socials might have already seen, because we've launched our very own public art competition, The George Blunden Public Art Prize.

Now, as an organisation, we've actually been commissioning public art for nearly a decade now. But this is the first time we've ever launched an actual prize, which is giving artists the chance to win 75,000 pounds and to work with Stonewater on a number of pieces over the coming year.

So joining me today as my co-host is our executive director of development Jonathan Layzell, who I believe was the person behind the idea of us launching the prize. Is that right, Jonathan?

Jonathan: Hello, Anisha. Well, yeah, it came out of a discussion with our chief executive, Nick Harris, because, as you say, we've been commissioning public art in various guises for nearly 10 years. But we felt we weren't necessarily raising the profile of it in quite the way that we could.

So out of that discussion, I did a bit of digging around and couldn't find anything similar to this in terms of a prize for artists or a competition. And decided to talk to various people within the organisation about raising the profile in this way.

Anisha: That's definitely the feedback we've had on social so far, that it seems like such a new idea. I mean, for those of our listeners who are tuning in today and might not have seen anything about the competition, I thought it might be useful to do just a bit of a quickfire round of questions.

So if you're ready, I'll just fire a few questions at you and then if you just give us a really quick answer. So Jonathan, who can enter?

Jonathan: It's basically open to anyone. So whether you're an established artist or you're somebody just starting out, as long as you're over the age of 18, you can enter.

Anisha: And then how do artists enter?

Jonathan: Well, it's an online submission. There's a link in the show notes and artists should register interest and then read through the competition brochure. But the submission is via a PDF proposal.

Anisha: And then is there anything that you're particularly looking for in the entries?

Jonathan: Well, we're giving people real freedom to put forward their ideas, but we're really interested in how artists plan on engaging with the community in creating the art. And also the environmental sustainability is a really big thing for Stonewater, the challenge of climate change. So we're looking at consideration for the environment as well in the proposals.

Anisha: And then probably most importantly, when do the entries close?

Jonathan: Entries close at midnight on the 6th of August. So there's a little bit of time, but not loads of time, I think. So get your thinking caps on.

Anisha: Yeah, I think what we've all realised, I know, I have this year, is that time goes a lot faster than I ever expect it to. And so hopefully also today's episode will help to inspire even more submissions and more expressions of interest.

But if you are listening and you're still undecided on whether you should enter, let's hear from some more guests. And I'm going to introduce our panelists today who both have experience in delivering public art, but from very different sides of the fence. So high, Mick and Jackie. Mick, would you like to start by introducing yourself?

Mick: Yeah, my name is Mick Kirkby-Geddes. I'm a metal sculptor. I've been doing this about 35 years since I left college. And I do public art, I do commissions, work at schools a bit and basically being a full time sculptor.

Anisha: Thanks, Mick. And then, Jacqui, would you like to do the same?

Jacqueline: Yeah. Hi, I'm Jacqui. I'm the development manager at Stonewater. And part of my role has meant that I've delivered on quite a few public art features now.

It was introduced in Stonewater in 2012. And I've worked on many schemes now where we've enhanced the public realm to make our schemes even more attractive.

Jonathan: Great. I feel like I already know you're both going to have a positive answer to this, but how would you both feel about public art? What value do you think it has for local communities? Perhaps, if we could ask you first, Mick.

Mick: The value for communities, I suppose, firstly, the main benefit of public art is the employment of artists, because they... speaking from a personal point of view. It's a good way of getting your artwork out there for people to see.

But in terms of the public art being placed in communities and stuff like that, it's good. It provides the focus and identity for an area, which is the sort of human interaction between the architecture and the place, really. It's somewhere where they can meet. They provide sort of meeting places, things like that, really.

You could say, I'll meet you at the benches or I'll meet you by the signpost or the archway or something like that. It's just of focus, really.

I recently did a piece or a few pieces, actually, for Cookridge house in Leeds as part of the Stonewater development there. They needed an entrance archway. So I made a big archway that went across the steps that lead up to the building, and then some benches, in a side kind of garden area.

And the benches took elements from the site - leaves from the trees that circle the site and kids' drawings as well are incorporated in the back to these seats. So it's like a little meeting area with three benches in it.

Jonathan: Thanks, Mick. And Jacqui, in terms of the value to the local communities, you've worked in housing for a long time, what difference do you think public art makes?

Jacqueline: I think it makes a tremendous difference, actually. We always wanted to provide good quality homes and the public art has just really taken that a step further.

All the public art we've delivered so far is of a high quality. It makes the developments more attractive, and it just creates a place where people choose to live, not have to live. And I think that's a tremendous difference. I think having the public art also encourages people to take pride in their local environment and it helps build a community.

And whilst we're actually in the throes of delivering public art, it offers up opportunities for us to engage with the local community. So, for instance, at several schemes now where we deliver public art, we've then gone into the local primary schools. At Stony Meadow, for instance, in West Sussex. We delivered giant flowers made of willow.

They created a sense of peace for the actual development, looked absolutely fabulous. And at the same time, we held a workshop at the primary school, which was opposite where the pupils made stars.

We decorated them in LED lights and they created fantastic decorations for the school's nativity play. So it's just not the actual feature that we're creating, but it's our engagement with the local community as well. So I think it's a win-win all round.

Jonathan: And Jacqui, do you think that appreciation for public art has been changed by the pandemic? Because we've all of us been spending, or most of us have been spending more time in and around the places we live. So our immediate environment, I guess, becomes more important. Do you think that that's true of the public art in the way that people view it?

Jacqueline: Yes. Yeah, most definitely. I think not everyone has the benefits of living somewhere, which is attractive. And I think particularly during lockdown, having a nice local environment has actually been invaluable to people. And I think it has a positive effect on people's wellbeing.

Anisha: I think that's a really interesting point, Jacqui, and I actually now want to play a clip from one of our customers who lives at Orchid Acre scheme in Stokes-sub-Hamdon.

In addition to providing public art of this scheme, we also worked with our contractor, Avante-Gardens, to provide a community garden. And at the scheme opening event, she had this to say.

Speaker: And I really love the community garden here. You can go and pick herbs. And there's fresh fruit and vegetables growing in the summer. And that's something that really makes it very different. And you wouldn't get that in one of the big large scale developments.

Anisha: I can imagine that the community garden was a really important feature last summer, especially in the middle of the pandemic. Mick, going back to Jonathan's original question for Jacqui, do you have any further thoughts?

Mick: Yeah, I think what Jacqui said is really true. People's world got smaller, didn't they, recently?

Anisha: Yeah.

Mick: Being able to go out just for a walk was quite an achievement. So exploring your local environment was quite a big step, really. And I think the appreciation of what's around us thinking simpler and smaller is actually quite important. And that's something we all ended up having to do, really.

Anisha: It's very true. And I think, Mick, it be really useful to understand, I think for us, because the idea of delivering a piece of art is so far from the realm of what I do. So it'd be good to know what the creative process is in delivering a piece of public art.

Mick: Well, Jacqui, touched on it earlier. I mean, you engage with the local community, and quite often working with local schools is really key to it because mainly kids are really enthusiastic and full of ideas.

And if you can engage the kids in the work and have input from them, the ideas could feed into the finished piece. So for my own work, I've used their images in the back of benches or on wall pieces or whatever, and you end up with this community involvement.

They own the piece in a way. It's not something that's plonked in the neighbourhood and nobody knows what it is. It's part of a whole process where kids can bring their families along and say, look that bit there, that's mine. I come up with that idea.

So it's ownership of the piece itself. But to go back to your question, usually you end up working with schools or local community groups just to generate ideas and to show that this is what you're doing, this is going to happen.

There's going to be something coming and you can get involved and shape the form of it really and have some input to it. That's the consultation bit. Usually the artists will probably go away and make the piece itself. And either you keep the public informed through photographs just so they understand the whole process of making a piece of artwork, because most people perhaps have no idea what is involved in it.

And then you end up bringing the piece to the site, siting it. And then like Jacqui said earlier, again, there's a celebration where this piece is there now and it's part of the community and everyone is involved with it, has a sort of party almost, a celebration event built around it as it's accepted into the community, I suppose.

Anisha: I really like the collaborative process. I didn't realise how much involvement you get from other people during creating the piece. Jacqui, what's been the process at Stonewater for commissioning public art? Are there any types of artists that you particularly look for?

Jacqueline: Actually, Anisha, it's a good point. I think it actually depends on the development itself. So, for instance, rural schemes, the public art for those tends to do well if it's wood, willow or an organic material.

Whereas if you look in an urban situation, you'll find that hard material. So say, for instance, metals, mosaics, murals, things like that, they tend to do better. And of course, in town centres you very rarely have a large amount of outside space. So you also have to be mindful of the space you've got.

The thing for me that's really important with public art is to have the link. What is the link? What is the connection to the scheme? So that could be via the new postal address, it could be previous uses of the site, it could be maybe a famous person who has lived in the town.

So, for instance, at one of our rural schemes where we decided to do a piece of... We were collaborating with a woodcarver, the development there was called Shackleton Close, after the famous Antarctic explorer because he had historic links to the village.

So the local primary school was also well versed in Shackleton's story. And the artist thought that we could do a Shackleton chest.

So he got a huge piece of oak, which he carved into a chest, which Shackleton could have taken on one of his voyages. And we had a workshop at the school. We asked the pupils, what do you think Shackleton would have taken on one of his voyages? And we got all sorts of fabulous answers, like binoculars, maps, compasses.

We had another couple of suggestions, like a mobile phone and a washing machine, which we actually include in the chest. But it was fabulous because all these items were put into the chest, were carved, put into the chest. And as Mick said earlier, the children were present at the opening of the scheme and it was fabulous to see them unveil it.

So yeah, I think quality, for me, and what is the connection are the most important things.

Jonathan: Yeah, that connection feels really important, doesn't it? Not just for the people who are helping to conceive the piece of art locally, but also in terms of people gaining a sense of that place and history of the place as they live in and around those surroundings.

So this is the first time Stonewater has launched a competition for public art. As I said earlier, I think it may be the first time that anybody has launched a competition of this scale and this breadth of public art. What do you think, Mick, about Stonewater taking this approach?

Mick: I think it's good. Quite often, you get developments and there's not really anything there, no focus or human touch to it, really. It's just sort of, I don't know, maybe lots of housing or building development or something like that. And I don't know. It just always need something to have a little focus about it. So it's a good idea. Yeah, definitely.

Jonathan: And Jacqui, you're going to be part... as the part of the judging panel. What do you think about us taking it from being something that where you were working as a development manager commissioning pieces of art to a prize, to a competition?

Jacqueline: I think it's a fabulous idea. I can't wait to see the submissions actually. It's just such a creative process. And I think I've... From starting out, being daunted by producing public art. I've really, really loved it. And you meet such interesting

people and you come across such a wealth of great ideas that only can enrich our developments, I think.

Anisha: Thank you both so much for joining us today. I think it would be really great to have any final words of wisdom for any housing providers who might be looking at commissioning public art or any artists that are considering entering the competition. Mick, do you want to give us some final thoughts of wisdom?

Mick: would say just have a go, do it. I mean, I think the artists have got a strange reputation. We're seen as a bit ethereal, a bit odd. But I mean, probably perhaps from Jacqui's experience, we're not really. We just have a slightly different mindset and ideas and we can bring something different to a project.

In terms of applying for competitions and things like that, yeah, do it. It can't be that difficult. It's just you got to believe in yourself and do what you do.

Anisha

Definitely. So for anyone listening, just do it. And Jacqui, what about you? Any final words of wisdom?

Jacqueline: Yeah, I just can't wait to see the submissions. But remember, from our point of view, the public art has to

last. So it must be of good quality. It needs to be well thought out and have that connection and it needs to be practical. So no trip hazards, that kind of thing.

Jonathan: Okay, well, as Anisha has said, thank you both for being here today. And thanks Anisha for inviting me to be your co-host.

Anisha: Any time.

Jonathan: If after today's episode, anyone has any questions about the Public Art Prize, then you can email awards@see-media.co.uk or you can messages on Instagram at [London_prize](https://www.instagram.com/London_prize).

Speaker: We hope you enjoyed listening to the latest episode of On the Air. We'll be publishing a new episode every month. But to stay up to date, subscribe to our channel.

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