

## Item

### **Newmarket Road Underpass – Opportunities for Urban Art**

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To: **East Area Committee**  
Report by: Nadine Black  
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Wards affected: Abbey, Market and Petersfield  
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### **Non-Key Decision**

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#### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 Environment and Community Services Scrutiny Committee, on 28th June 2018 considered a report that sets out the future aspirations for public art in the City, and the need to develop a new Public Art Strategy. As part of this work, the Council has committed to develop an Urban Art Strategy. Preliminary work has begun on the Urban Art Strategy and Newmarket Road Subway has been identified as a potential area for the provision of walls for urban art to be created.
- 1.2 Newmarket Road Subway is a target for illegal graffiti and antisocial behaviour and the Council continually uses its resources to respond to incidents in the area. Also, a public petition calling for the granting of urban art walls in the City has been created. East Area Committee is asked to approve the principle of developing an urban art space at Newmarket Road Subway and trial the provision of urban art walls to provide a creative hub for artists, which could vastly improve the appearance and use of the area, given that it will encourage artists who produce more refined work and attract visitors.

- 1.3 Developing a hub for urban artists does incur a risk of graffiti, and as such, it is recommended that the Council develops a guidance document (as part of the wider Urban Art Strategy to be considered by the Executive Councillor later in 2018) that sets out the terms for painting (or sculpting) in a permitted public area (whether this is Newmarket Road subway or more broadly) and offers a clear distinction between permitted street or urban art that is beneficial to the public realm and unauthorised, illegal graffiti.
- 1.4 This report sets out some of the risks and benefits of urban art (Appendix 1), as well as some options for commissioned or facilitated urban art projects in the location to kick start the project and positively activate the space.

## **2. Recommendations**

2.1 The East Area Committee Councillors are recommended to:

- (a) Approve the principle for developing urban art walls in Newmarket Road Subway to provide a creative hub, as a trial (this will be subject to agreement with Cambridgeshire County Council as the owners of the subway structure);
- (b) Note the development of a guidance policy and set of guidance rules for artists painting in the area; and
- (c) Support the principle of the development of urban art commissions to activate the space, if the project is feasible and also to seek funding for the commissions, which would likely be from external sources and could include:
  - i) Provision for a youth project in the area, working with an experienced urban artist create a design for the Newmarket Road Subway;
  - ii) A potential commission by established street artists for urban art in Newmarket Road Subway;
  - iii) Allocate revenue budget from Streets and Open Space to install signage in the area and support the removal of any illegal or offensive works to ensure that the policy is upheld.

### 3. Background

- 3.1 Urban Art is as old as the streets themselves. Over 2000 years ago in the ancient cities of the world, graffiti and street art were carved and scrawled onto the walls. They represented the word of the ordinary person and of the voiceless and in many respects even today, this form of art does a similar job but it has moved on somewhat.
- 3.2 Today, urban art can be defined as visual art created in public locations, usually unsanctioned artwork executed outside of the context of traditional art venues. Urban art does not consist of purely painting; common forms include spray paint, stencil, wheatpasted poster art, sticker art, street installations, and sculpture. Video projection and yarn bombing are also popular.



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## **What is an Urban Art Wall?**

- 3.3 A urban art wall provides a specific location where owner permission is granted for transient or ephemeral works of art that artists 'donate' in their own time.
- 3.4 This would not be the first permitted urban art site in Cambridgeshire. Histon and Impington Parish Council have agreed a wall along the Guided Busway. The area was already a target for tagging, but the project by Kilo is not tagged over. Legal locations are listed here <https://legal-walls.net/>

## **Current Situation at Newmarket Road Subway**

- 3.5 The area is already a target for illegal graffiti and antisocial behavior, authorising or commissioning urban art could vastly improve the appearance of the site given that it will encourage artists to produce more refined work in the area.
- 3.6 The County Council is currently working with the City Council's Enforcement team to carry out some remedial works to the entrance walls, which are currently tagged. This project is about 30% complete.
- 3.7 Officers at the County Council are supportive of surface painting, including all walls and railings, and have been consulted on about this proposal.
- 3.8 A small amount of the County Council's maintenance budget can be made available to prepare some walls for painting, if necessary.

## **4. Approach; Further Considerations and Options**

- 4.1 The creation of an urban art space at Newmarket Road subway offers the opportunity to use culture to create a longer term plan for the subway and wider area; the potential to create of a new vibrant public space, which grows a positive reputation and becomes a destination in its own right for local residents and visitors to the City.
- 4.2 Should the principle of developing an urban art space at Newmarket Road Subway be approved a feasibility study will be

undertaken to understand the opportunities and constraints. The feasibility study must include consultation with experienced urban artists to ensure that any proposals or guidance work for both the Council and artists and which may include:

- Survey of the existing walls to understand what preparation work may be required;
- Survey the wider space to understand if remedial works are required to assure access and safety;
- Explore options for Environmental Improvements both short term and long term should the trail be successful; to facilitate the creation of a quality public space;
- Develop guidance for artists and rules of engagement;
- Consider what resources can be allocated to monitoring or installing signage in the area that advises of the rules (i.e. do not paint on trees, please take your rubbish away, etc);
- Consider if the permitted walls for painting in Newmarket Road subway should include rejuvenation of the existing murals in the passageways or be restricted to plaza or entrance walls;
- Liaise with the Planning Service regarding links with this project and aspirations for the Eastern Gate area; and
- Liaise with the Community Safety Group and Community Development Teams.

4.3 In addition to the provision of urban art walls, consideration can be given to some additional commissioning options, subject to the seeking funding.

1) Commissioned Youth Project with Experienced Urban Artists/s Approximate cost £10k.

Benefits:

- Dedicated programme of youth arts activity and education
- New medium of public art work in the city
- Improved appearance of the subway
- Safe practice guaranteed by the involvement of an experienced artist to lead the work
- Freedom of expression and a new audience for arts in the city
- Offers paid work to artists and dispels any misconceptions that we are encouraging artists to work for free

## 2) Commission Established Street Artists using Public Art S106

Estimated cost: £30k

Benefits:

- Sets a standard of high quality artwork
- Improvement to the appearance of the subway
- Encourages a new medium of public art work in the city
- Engages a new audience in the arts
- Adds a new dimension to arts education as commissions will require public engagement in order to meet Public Art S106 requirements
- Offers paid work to artists and dispels any misconceptions that we are encouraging artists to work for free

## 5. Implications

### 5.1 Financial implications:

The development of the Urban Art Strategy and the Newmarket Way Subway development project will be met within existing budgets. S106 funding for public art is very low within the Newmarket Road Subway area (Abbey, Market and Petersfield Wards). It is likely that external funding will need to be sought to support commissions to launch the space.

### 5.2 Staffing implications:

There are no staffing implications arising from the recommendations in this report

### 5.3 Equality and Poverty implications:

The Council's approach to public art expects that it should be freely and widely accessible. Urban Art gives a freedom of expression and can give a voice to those who feel disenfranchised. All projects should uphold the Council's commitment to equality and diversity.

### 5.4 Environmental Implications:

The provision of public art in the city adds to the interest, variety and quality of the public realm. The trial could help address issues of graffiti and anti-social behaviour in the Newmarket Road Subway.

**5.5 Procurement Implications:**

The feasibility study will include best practice recommendations for procurement.

**5.6 Community Safety Implications:** The inclusion of works of art in public places can make them more attractive and encourage people to use them. The feasibility study will include the development of guidelines for urban artists, which include safety advice and in partnership with the Community Safety Group. The trial could help address issues of graffiti and anti-social behaviour in the Newmarket Road Subway.

**5.7 Consultation and communication considerations:**

The feasibility study will involve consultation with key stakeholders, urban artists and the community.

**6.0 Background papers**

Public Art SPD [www.cambridge.gov.uk/public-art-spd](http://www.cambridge.gov.uk/public-art-spd)

Public Art on the City Council website

[www.cambridge.gov.uk/public-art](http://www.cambridge.gov.uk/public-art)

**7.0 Inspection of papers**

To inspect the background papers, or if you have a query on the report, please contact:

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Urban Art and Its Benefits**

The point at which urban art is perceived as unauthorised, illegal graffiti and the point at which it is perceived as beneficial to the visual identity of a city is often a matter of debate and interpretation. To some its presence is an indicator of deprivation; to some it is an indication of gentrification and to some it's an opportunity for creative expression outside of a gallery. Regardless of these associations, there is a clear difference of artistic quality between graffiti and works of urban art. 'The main difference between graffiti writing and street art is intention. Graffiti writers are not interested in the general public understanding their artwork. They are primarily concerned with other graffiti writers who can decipher the coded tags and appreciate the style of the writing. Also the ritual of vandalism comes into play.\*'

Given the expansion and development of urban art as a recognised market by art specialists, and as a growing economic contributor in locations across the UK and internationally, it is appropriate for the Council to give further consideration to definitions of graffiti and urban art in the context of Cambridge and the potential benefits and risks that endorsement of urban art and the creation of a space for it, could bring to the city.

Having said this, providing authorised areas for the creation of urban art doesn't always drive out graffiti activity, there could be some 'leakage' outside of the permitted area. Also, larger mural works will diminish with the impact of tags.

#### **Economic Benefit**

The potential economic benefits include a contribution to the tourism offer and therefore to the city as a whole. Tourists are well known for visiting Cambridge for short stays. Providing more leisure and cultural activities, such as art and sculpture walking tours, may encourage tourists to stay longer and venture outside of the historic city centre.

#### **Social Benefit**

Urban art brings artistic and cultural conversation out of the gallery environment and makes it accessible to all those who pass by it. It



therefore reaches an audience that spans across age, ethnicity and economic background.

The Arts Plan for the city refers to greater accessibility to the arts and cultural offer and urban art has a role to play in introducing and connecting people to facilities in the city. Through incidental engagement or introduction in the streetscape people may then engage with the more formal cultural provision (i.e. museums and galleries).

Urban art may typically appeal to a younger audience and there is evidence of requests for graffiti walls made to our Children and Young Peoples Service team (Chypps).

There is an increasing body of evidence linking engagement in arts and cultural activity to positive educational, social and health outcomes.

### **Cultural Benefit**

Permitting this form of creative self-expression in public is an empowering experience and will encourage new youth interest in arts and culture, thereby engaging a new audience. It also provides a new platform for emerging artists in the city.

A legal graffiti or urban art site encourages a new medium of public art work in the city, which is otherwise lacking. Many cities around the UK and abroad have a vibrant urban art scene as part of their visitor offer, with some cities now offering urban art festivals as part of their events calendar.

### **Placemaking Benefit**

If Urban Art is to be read as a recognised form of Public Art, then planning policy within Cambridge recognises that public art is an integral part of creating successful places. In particular, that it makes an important contribution to the character and visual quality of the city. It creates distinction and improves the quality of the built environment. It is part of creating good design in new developments and adding to the high quality of life in Cambridge.

### **Urban Art and Its Risks**

Urban art and graffiti are seen as a 'counter culture' - artistic expression that is outside of the gallery or 'establishment', gifted to

the public and specifically challenges the notions of private ownership and legal permissions.

The risk of endorsing urban art is that graffiti artists may see it as an opportunity to create works in unauthorised locations, without permission. This may mean an increased level of resource being required to remove unauthorised graffiti either nearby to the subway, or elsewhere in the city.

Whilst a permitted location will attract some professional artists, it will also attract aspiring artists and there will be variable quality of works.

In addition, works of urban art will not be to everybody's taste. However, as a subway, this location is set away from historic, traditional streets thereby not affecting the perceived character of the historic centre, and provides ample wall space for a variety of creative expression.

Both Councils will need to consider the possibility of needing some additional resource to tackle any illegal graffiti that might spring up as a result. This could be a joint commitment from both the City and County Council.

Planners have advised that the murals/art work should not be considered under the definition of an advert under the advertisement regulations. The advertisement regulations are complex and the precise nature of any wording/graphics in the graffiti in the future could possibly be construed as an 'advert'. Content of the artwork could need monitoring to ensure that it is not breaching advertising regulations and more broadly that it is respectful and not offensive. Reporting mechanisms are already in place for the public.

Inexperienced artists may not always consider public safety. Some suggested guidance for artists, which includes safety considerations will be developed.