



## **PUBLIC ART**

### **THE MISSING HEART OF OUR PUBLIC SPACES**

#### *Norwich Society response to Proposed Section 106 Prioritisation Framework Consultation*

#### **Introduction**

1.1. Norwich City Council is seeking views on proposed changes to its current system of imposing planning obligations on developers in the form of contributions under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. These changes are being sought in response to both local and national lobbying by the building industry and developers to the effect that the current economic climate makes such contributions too onerous, and can lead to delay or cancellation of projects.

1.2. Section 106 contributions are used to pay for improvements to the social infrastructure, surrounding new buildings and developments. These can include paying for an agreed percentage of affordable housing within a development, new roads, schools, health facilities and other benefits to the public realm. Many councils, unlike Norwich, choose as an act of policy to extend the use of Section 106 to make developers use a very small portion (usually less than 1%) of construction costs to pay for public art.

1.3. The Norwich Society is strongly in favour of the constructive use of Section 106 to improve as much of the City's social infrastructure as possible. But the City Council's consultation also enables us to comment on what we consider to be a major omission in the Planning Department's standard list of possible requirements – that of Public Art. Norwich is failing to use a planning tool which could mightily enhance our cityscape, making it more attractive to citizens, tourists and outside investors drawn by the quality of life in our community.

#### **Public Art Unites, Unifies and Promotes Communities**

2.1. As we have argued in a previously published discussion document (*Public Sculpture in Norwich, August 2007*), good public art in Norwich, usually in the shape of sculpture, would give a strong focus and form to key areas of our City. It could be a source of public pride as well as delight and, in some cases, amusement. Using subjects drawn from Norwich's uniquely rich history, it could be a unifier, increasing our sense of ownership of open spaces and our sense of community. And by improving the public realm it would act as an economic driver, increasing Norwich's attractions as a place in which to live, work and invest.

2.2. Use of Section 106 to make developers add to the visual wealth of the City would therefore provide a major benefit in kind. Improvements and input to spaces forming the planning or historic context around any proposal for development should be a basic requirement. Such improvements should incorporate works of artistic merit



(ranging from paving schemes to plaques to sculpture), that would help raise the general prestige of Norwich. The City could and should become famous for the quality and originality of its public art, for an urban landscape that gives pleasure *and is an attraction* for visitors, residents and the working population alike.

2.3. This is no distant dream. Many councils of all sizes up and down the country, from Birmingham to Southend-on-Sea are active users of Section 106 requirements to add to their bank of public art. Corby District Council, for instance, used planning requirements to get a total spend of £286,200 in just two years. Southampton City Council obtained developers' contributions to the value of £2.25 million in six years. Similarly, many councils (including most successfully Ipswich!) have a public art strategy already in place.

### **A Simple Proposal**

3.1. The list of requirements that should normally be achieved as part of any scheme considered by Norwich City Council's Planning Applications Committee consists at present of:

1. General transportation contributions/enhancements
2. Affordable housing
3. Play/open space
4. Way finding/signs
5. Education
6. Libraries
7. Heritage interpretation
8. Shop mobility

3.2. We propose that a ninth requirement should be added – that of the provision of Public Art. While Number 7 – Heritage interpretation – might partake of some of the qualities of public art, it is by no means the same, being much more limited in scope and possible impact. Public art might include heritage references, but should transcend them and encompass much more as an experience.

3.3. It may be argued that a recession is not a good time to be considering adding (however minimally) to the cost of private development. But when *is* a good time for such an initiative? We feel that the acceptance of public art and sculpture as a social cost is the mark both of a civilised and of a forward-looking community. Anything that makes Norwich a more attractive place to live, that builds on the existing and accumulated capital of our quality of life is to be encouraged. And with Section 106 the City Council has the tool to hand to do the job. So why not use it?

### **Conclusion**

4.1. Thriving communities have an identity of their own. In cities, that identity is expressed through architecture and public art. It is strange that Norwich, unique in so many ways, has so little that is outstanding in the way of art in its open spaces. The Norwich Society offers the short, simple suggestion above as a step towards the sort of co-ordinated public art strategy that the City needs.