

# Report analysing results of public consultation on the 'To the River' public art project - Selvedge' concept design proposal



July 2022



## 1. Background

- 1.1 In 2016<sup>1</sup>, the Council approved the development of a new public art commission to promote and celebrate the story of the river Cam through an artist in residence commission. The project, titled 'To the River', sought to engage with local communities to research stories, facts, and aspects of the river; and to use the results to develop a responsive, site-specific public artwork for the city.
- 1.2 The project is funded by [public art S106 developer contributions](#), which have been secured specifically for the delivery of public art projects in accordance with our Public Art Policy.
- 1.3 The project has been overseen by a steering group comprising of representatives from the city council, the Museum of Cambridge, the Cam Conservators, and external public art expertise.

### The Commission

- 1.4 The brief for the artist in residence required an artist to be resident on the river for at least one year and to creatively engage the local community and stakeholders to build a resource and to discover hidden narratives along the length of the river within the city's boundary. This included exploring the river's relationship to the foundation of Cambridge as a city, its ecology and social history; and using the results to develop a permanent public artwork to be located somewhere on the river within the city's boundary.
- 1.5 After an initial delay from the decision taken, in 2018, the Council commissioned artist [Caroline Wright](#) as artist in residence for the river Cam through a robust procurement process. As artist in residence, Caroline has spent [two years engaging with hundreds of members of the local community](#); discovering hidden narratives about the river through live participatory engagement events and other community projects. These included family workshops; river water sampling; FLOW; Knit for the River; What Colour is the River?; and [Raverat's River digital map](#) (which can be accessed online, and takes people on a guided tour of Gwen Raverat's artistic influences around the River Cam). The engagement elements of the residency were widely publicised by the Council and other partners, including the Museum of Cambridge. Caroline also engaged with stakeholders, such as the Cam Valley Forum and the Cam Conservators.
- 1.6 Further details on the commission engagement activities is included in the following link: [information about each of the engagement elements](#).

### Concept Proposal: 'Selvedge'

- 1.7 The residency inspired the development of a concept proposal for a site-specific, permanent public artwork to be located at Sheep's Green entitled 'Selvedge'. The

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<sup>1</sup> [Community Services Scrutiny Committee 17<sup>th</sup> March 2016](#).

concept design is grounded in the context of the river and learnings from the artist in residency research and community engagement activity.

- 1.8 The Selvedge concept is a three-dimensional sculpture formed in a subtle gold-coloured metal – with an effect that can be described as like the range of colours seen in sunlight when oil has been dropped into a puddle – to be positioned along the riverbank at Sheep’s Green, dipping into the river water and folding along and up, connecting land and water and etched with the pattern of Cambridge lace.
  
- 1.9 The section of riverbank, where the proposed artwork would be installed, comprises of 50 metres of sheet metal piling to address riverbank erosion issues. The artwork will utilise this existing metal sheet piling as a framework on which it will be fixed and formed. There is potential for the artwork to aesthetically improve the current engineered sheet-metal structure and so enhance public views from Mill Pond, Laundress Green and Silver Street Bridge.



More [information on the creative ideas for Selvedge](#) can be found online.

## 2. Consultation on the Concept Proposal

- 2.1 The public consultation on the proposed 'Selvedge' concept design ran from 7<sup>th</sup> February to 18<sup>th</sup> March 2022. The supporting text explained that the consultation sought feedback on the concept design principles of the artwork; and explained that the detailed design of the artwork would be informed by the results of the consultation. A public exhibition displaying the 'Selvedge' concept design was held at Cambridge Central Library from Monday 7<sup>th</sup> to Friday 11<sup>th</sup> February, with the artist in attendance to answer any questions. [You can view further details on the public consultation online.](#)
- 2.2 Consultees were invited to comment on the initial concept proposals, but were not asked to vote on whether or not the artwork should go ahead and proceed to the detailed design stage. As the detailed design stage has not yet taken place, due process would see the concept design consultation feedback informing the direction of the subsequent detailed design stage.

### Consultation results

- 2.3 The public consultation generated 142 email responses as well as verbal feedback at the Central Library in-person public exhibition<sup>2</sup>. A summary analysis of these responses is included below, including the main themes and issues raised together with the Council's corresponding response.

### Feedback on the concept proposal

- 2.4 20% of the feedback was directly related to the proposed artwork. You can see a full breakdown of this in Section 3

### Feedback not directly addressing the concept proposal

- 2.5 Since the project was first conceived in 2016, public concerns around the health of the river environment, including water quality and flow levels, have grown, fuelled in the last year or so by increasing national and local news and social media coverage. This meant that much of the consultation feedback focused on people's concerns about the river's health as opposed to the merits of the proposed 'Selvedge' public artwork concept design.

### Representation of Cambridge residents

- 2.6 Representations from organisations such as residents' associations and stakeholders linked to the river were received on behalf of the organisations' members, with individual members also responding to the consultation. During the consultation response analysis, it became apparent that a number of the responses were presented

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<sup>2</sup> The number of participants engaged in the exhibition element of the consultation is unknown due to the nature of the setup and the exhibition not always being manned.

in similar formats and on block and therefore represented a concerted campaign, rather than reflecting the views of a diverse range of Cambridge residents.

### **Sharing of factually incorrect information**

- 2.7 During the consultation, there was evidence of online social media content, which included factually incorrect or selective information about the proposed concept design. Some of this information was shared within organised networks and on public forums and, as such, influenced some of the formal consultation feedback. The Council sought to address the issue of misinformation by updating the consultation information/communications to correct and clarify the content being shared and by extending the closing date of the consultation period.

### 3 Consultation Analysis

- 3.1 In total there were 277 comments submitted (within the 142 email responses), relating to a number of subject areas. To analyse the consultation feedback, we have taken all comments raised in each submission and grouped them into themes.
- 3.2 Some subject areas were raised by a higher number of people, while others were raised by one individual.
- 3.3 A substantial number of comments were related to the incorrect or selective information being shared online and misunderstandings about the project, for example that the Council was proposing to dig out the natural riverbank to install the public artwork.
- 3.4 This report summarises the main themes identified from the feedback analysis. It firstly outlines comments received to support the further development of the artwork; and then presents the main themes and issues raised; with the Council's response, which we hope provides some clarity and reassurance.

#### Comments in support of Selvedge as a proposed work of art

- 3.5 10% of responses expressed support for the proposal and included the following specific comments:
- i. *The proposal reflects effective use of S106 money as the artwork adds value to the public sphere and is an exciting and diverse piece which will be a delight to the local community and the environment. It will vastly improve the existing sheet metal work*
  - ii. *The artwork is a beautiful provocative piece that will capture the hearts of local people as well as Cambridge's many visitors*
  - iii. *The proposed final piece will be an important reflection of the relationship between the river Cam and the city's history. It also reflects the legacy of the river projects which have involved local communities in understanding the heritage and value of the river over time and provoking the question of what the river means to them.*
  - iv. *The sculpture looks very carefully planned and thought out and cleverly connects land and river, and the design and the material will elegantly reflect the 'flow' of the river.*
  - v. *"The sculpture will flow in and out and over the riverbank, glinting a gold metallic colour and etched with the design of Cambridge Lace. It will incorporate specially selected biodiverse plants growing within and around the structure." Interesting. Does it meet the criteria - art & function - artistic and functional? Our judgement as a family, who have lived by the river in Newnham, for 40 years, is that it does. Brave but sensitive also.*
  - vi. *There is an understanding of the importance of the river in our relationship with the city and that "static nature of land gives way to the ever-changing river". The river deserves this attention and celebration. I think the form and*

*the lacework are gorgeous and set in an artificial waterway, it could be a spectacular homage to our river.*

### **Comments against Selvedge as a proposed work of art**

- 3.6 10% of negative comments directly related to the merit of the proposal as a work of art, which primarily was what the consultation was seeking feedback about. Two respondents felt the work was underwhelming. Several others simply didn't like it. 4% of comments relating to the artwork itself cited the rationale behind the artwork being poor or non-existent.
- 3.7 6% of those responding to the consultation directly commented about the colour of the sculpture using phrases such as 'bling' and 'gold-plated riverbank' to describe the proposed artwork. This had a direct relationship to factually incorrect information being shared online, as previously mentioned. The proposed artwork was never going to be made of gold or finished to have the intensity of gold plating. The reference to gold in the proposal related to the colour of the art. The colour was described as gold, but the proposal was for a subtle colour with an effect that can be described as like the range of colours seen in sunlight when oil has been dropped into a puddle. It was not proposed that the work would be shining as a bright metallic gold. During the consultation period, the Council updated the consultation to clarify any misunderstandings around the proposed colour and extended the closing date.
- 3.8 Four respondents commented on the potential insensitivity of using the gold colour for the artwork, within the context of wealth inequality in Cambridge. Such responses in are an example of how public art can be used to instigate important conversations around important community issues; and was one of the artist's stated intentions for the proposed artwork.

### **Key issues, concerns, questions, and misunderstandings that do not directly address Selvedge as a proposed work of art**

- 3.9 60% of feedback for the proposal focused on concerns, questions, misunderstandings or related to factually incorrect or selective information being shared online.

### **Health of the river concerns**

- 3.10 This represents the highest number of comments for one subject area, with 14% of respondents expressing concerns about the health of the river through pollution, over abstraction and the national and local 'growth' agenda. 4% of respondents questioned the use of developer contributions to fund the project when development was seen as one of the causes of declining river health.
- 3.11 The artist has been sensitive to issues around the ecology of the river throughout her research and has engaged with stakeholders on such issues. The design for the artwork intended to have a maintenance routine whereby river levels could be monitored through the artwork. The fact that the health of the river became a focus for

the consultation for the artwork is once again an example of how public art can be used to instigate important conversations around important community issues.

- 3.12 The use of developer s106 contributions to fund this and other public art projects is intended to provide mitigation of development and, whilst the funding cannot be used to directly address the impact of the health of the river, it can be used to celebrate its importance to the city and beyond, and to start a critical debate about the river, which is why the commission was developed.

### **River ecology and biodiversity concerns.**

- 3.13 11% of respondents raised concerns about negative impacts on river ecology and biodiversity (the second highest total of comments for one subject area). Environmental responsibility has been at the heart of the 'To the River' project from the outset. The artist and the Council's public art team have worked closely with the Council's Biodiversity Officer since day one. An Ecological Impact Assessment was undertaken, that showed the artwork would have no negative impacts on the health of the river, wildlife, or the wider environment. In fact, the proposed artwork would have provided positive impacts. The proposed artwork did not act as a threat to the existing biodiversity and wildlife located in the area. The design took into consideration indigenous species to ensure it did not impede on natural habitat but enhance it. The artwork allows for a gap between the riverbank and the sculpture which provides a location for plants to grow, and for water species such as water voles to live and thrive.

### **Concerns about inserting the sculpture into 50 metres of natural riverbank.**

- 3.14 There was a clear misunderstanding about where and how the sculpture would be located, with 9% of respondents not supporting the proposal because of concerns that the Council would dig into 50 metres of natural riverbank. Some of the misunderstandings were related to incorrect information being shared on social media. The Council published additional details about the context of the site to correct any misinformation and/ or confusion; and extended the consultation period.
- 3.15 The project does not propose to replace 50 metres of the natural riverbank, indeed quite the opposite. The 50-metre section of bank initially comprised vertical wooden cladding bolted onto retained sheet piling, which had been assessed as dangerous, with numerous gaps behind for cattle or members of the public to get their legs trapped. In response, the Council installed a sheet metal piling solution to the above, which the artwork would utilise as a framework on which it would be fixed. The work would not have imposed itself into the natural riverbank. The artwork would aesthetically improve the current engineered structure and create opportunities to enhance the views from Mill Pond, Laundress Green, and Silver Street Bridge. During the consultation, the Council updated the consultation to clarify any misunderstandings and extended the closing date.



### **Misunderstandings about how the project is funded and what the funding can be spent on, including suggestions for what the funding should be spent on elsewhere.**

- 3.16 8% of comments related to misunderstandings about how the project is funded, and that it would use public money in the form of Council Tax for the development of public art projects. 3% of respondents suggested other things the Council could spend the money on. However, this would not be possible within the rules for the funding. Public art is funded through s106 developer contributions. S106 contributions can be sought through the planning process and can be allocated under a few categories, from play equipment to community facilities to green space. Public Art is one such category, and the money allocated to public art cannot be reallocated to other categories, let alone to other council expenditure. If the Council does not use this funding to develop public art projects, it must be given back to the developer.

### **Concerns about the artwork being installed in a local nature reserve in relationship to materiality and the context of the setting**

- 3.17 4% of comments related to objections to the sculpture being installed in a Local Nature Reserve with another 5% concerned about the negative impact of work in a natural setting. Most of the public open space along the river in Cambridge is protected to some degree, whether it's a Common Land or a Local Nature Reserve etc. The location for this artwork is not actually within a Local Nature Reserve but it is within a natural setting. The proposal for Selvedge responds to and respects the natural setting and it would aesthetically enhance the existing sheet metal work at the location. The artwork would 'flow' along the sheet metal work at Sheep's Green and would not be installed within the open space. It would mainly be visible from vistas across and around the area but not directly in the public green space adjoining the riverbank. Public art projects are often located within Local Nature Reserves and natural settings; indeed, the Swift Tower at Logan's Meadow is an example of a Council commissioned public art project within a Local Nature Reserve.

### **Concerns around maintenance, potential vandalism, and theft**

- 3.18 There were nine representations (3%) in relation to concerns about the future maintenance of the artwork, including four with concerns about theft and vandalism. The artwork would be designed so that it would be robust and maintenance light. A maintenance plan would be developed as part of the detailed design stage.
- 3.19 The artist would work with a structural engineer and fabricators to ensure that opportunities for theft are designed out of the work.

### **Comments and questions in relationship to the budget and misunderstandings around what the budget covered.**

- 3.20 There were a couple of comments in relationship to how much the budget for the project is and how much has been spent so far. From a budget of £120,000, £70,000 has been paid for the Artist Residency in line with the agreement between the council

and the artist. This £70,000 budget covered the artist's two-year residency and all related expenses to develop community engagement projects; including participatory and temporary elements, which have engaged hundreds of people. The remaining balance, £50,000, was allocated to the development of Selvedge, including all costs such as artist's fees, professional fees, material and fabrication and all associated fees.

### **Lack of engagement in the project.**

- 3.21 There were 11 representations (4%) from people concerned with the lack of direct engagement with local groups in Newnham and/or groups linked to the river, prior to the consultation. Working as artist in residence for 2 years, the artist has engaged with hundreds of people through the research and development stage of the project and the Council, working with the Museum of Cambridge and others have actively promoted the project across the city. The artist has worked with stakeholders relating to the river from the beginning of her appointment. The only group linked to the river that the artist did not directly engage with was the Friends of the Cam because this group was formed sometime after the project commenced, and towards the end of it. As soon as we were made aware of the existence of the Friends of the Cam, the artist and Council officers met with them.

### **Not in Newnham.**

- 3.22 8 respondents (3%) stated that they didn't want to see the work in Newnham. One cited attracting tourists to the area as a negative outcome for the artwork. Three people felt that the work should be in a less affluent Ward instead of a wealthy one. The location was selected after two years' research undertaken during the artist's residency along the length of the river and as such it is site-specific to this bank on Laundress Green, bearing in mind considerations such as its proximity to sluice gates and a river flow that would rinse the work, as well as not inconveniencing moorings or other riverbank users. The location was also considered to be suitable regarding access, safety, and overall aesthetic. The artwork in another location would not be site specific to the story behind the final design. As the project brief was to explore the entirety of the River Cam within Cambridge, there was no predetermined site located for the work. The work and location evolved through the process of the artist residency.

### **Boat and boater safety.**

- 3.23 Five people (2%) commented that the section of riverbank is often used by paddlers/punters, using the location to rest and/or unload people. This has been considered through the concept design stage, in terms of the current bank reinforcements allowing for this but not being designed to facilitate this. Further consideration would be given during the detailed design stage.

## 4 Consultation with the Council's Public Art Panel

- 4.1 The City Council has a Public Art Panel to provide independent advice on public art proposals, including relevant strategies and delivery plans developed through the planning process and the Council's own public art commissions. The Panel comprises of individuals with established expertise and skills in public art commissioning.

Considerations may include:

- a) Quality of the Work
- b) Programme
- c) Context
- d) Public Benefit
- e) Community Engagement
- f) Technical and Financial Viability

- 4.2 The Public Art Panel has been involved with and supported 'To the River' from its inception, during the development of ideas for the residency events and activities, through to the design of the concept proposal for Selvedge.
- 4.3 They have been supportive and impressed with the research and engagement undertaken by Caroline as artist in residence and its subsequent use in the development of the proposed Selvedge concept design. They have been impressed by all elements of the 'To the River' project and community engagement.
- 4.4 The Panel supported the Selvedge concept proposal to be further developed and taken to the detailed design stage. They agreed that the concept proposal was strong and a high-quality response to the artist's brief, which would lead to a positive piece of public art in Cambridge. They thought the rigour of process and the rationale that underpins the design of the concept proposal is impressive, particularly in relationship to telling the story of the role of women in social history related to this area of the city and the critical debate this may facilitate.
- 4.5 The Panel had concerns about the consultation process and the misinformation being shared on social media and how this could impact the result of the consultation.

## 5 Conclusion and recommendation

- 5.1 Members of the public were invited to comment on the concept proposal for the Selvedge sculpture as part of the wider 'To the River' commission. They were not asked to vote 'Yes' or 'No' for the artwork as in a referendum, rather to input their thoughts to help develop the initial concept to follow due process.
- 5.2 There are concerns that some consultation feedback was presented in similar formats and on block and therefore represented a concerted campaign, rather than reflecting the views of a diverse range of Cambridge residents.
- 5.3 During the consultation, there was some social media coverage, which included factually incorrect information being shared on public forums and as such made its way into the consultation feedback. The Council updated the consultation to correct the misinformation and clarify any associated misunderstandings and extended the consultation closing date.
- 5.4 The majority of responses received (60%) were not directly related to the proposed concept design. Of these, the largest number (14%) related to concerns around the health of the river, which was not related directly to the artwork consultation. Of the 20% of respondents that did directly comment on the concept proposal, an equal number were 'for' as were 'against' (10% were supportive of the concept, while 10% were not).
- 5.5 The second largest topic for comment was around the negative impact of the work upon the river's ecology and biodiversity systems. The artist has worked with the Council's Biodiversity Officer since the beginning of the project and taken advice and undertaken due diligence. An Ecology Impact assessment has been undertaken and the proposal would have no negative impacts on biodiversity. Indeed, it has been assessed as having a net gain.
- 5.6 9% of comments, related to installing the artwork within 50 metres of natural riverbank. Factually incorrect information was being shared and the Council updated and extended the consultation to clarify that the project does not propose to replace 50 metres of the natural riverbank.
- 5.8 Misunderstandings about the funding for the project also brought some criticism. The project is not funded via Council Tax but via s106 developer contributions. If the artwork were not to go ahead, the funding could not be spent on anything other than commissioning public art in the city. Unspent money must be returned to developers.
- 5.9 4% of comments related to objections to the artwork being installed in a Local Nature Reserve with another 5% concerned about the negative impact of work in a natural setting. The view of the artist and the council is that the proposal for Selvedge responds to and respects the natural setting and would aesthetically enhance the existing sheet metal work at the location. The artwork would 'flow' along the sheet metal work at Sheep's Green and would not be installed within the open space. It would mainly be

visible from vistas across and around the area but not directly in the green space surrounding the riverbank.

- 5.10 It is important to note that more supportive comments than usual for a public artwork project consultation at this stage, were received. Previous public artwork projects which received more negative feedback than this one have gone on to become much valued community assets
- 5.11 Based on the consultation results, including the Public Art Panel's strong support for the 'Selvedge' proposal; and taking into account the misinformation that contributed to many of the public concerns expressed, the Council is supportive of the proposal moving forward to the detailed design stage.

## 6 Addendum November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022

- 6.1 It is with regret that, following a 'next stage' project review meeting, the Council and artist Caroline Wright have jointly agreed that the permanent 'Selvedge' sculpture on Sheep's Green riverbank, proposed through the wider 'To the River' project, will not proceed to the detailed design stage.
- 6.2 The artist's residency on the To River Project was initially intended to be two years but, due to various delays – such as Covid-19 lockdowns halting momentum in engagement projects plus increasing costs of materials and resources – the residency has taken over four years to get to this stage.
- 6.3 Over the extended project period, changes to the river's health have become an increasing local concern, which came through strongly in the consultation responses.
- 6.4 Given the combination of practical considerations, alongside the sense that the local community would not support a public artwork being sited on the river in this location, both the artist and Council have agreed that the 'To the River' project should now conclude. The available budget allocation (£50,000) will be de-allocated and made available for other public art projects in the city.