

# Artist Voices: How is Public Art Commissioned?

## Key points from interviews

- Make sure any artwork you propose satisfies you as the artist. It is not just about what the client is requesting.
- In order to gain experience think about preparing a mock proposal for a public art project to gain practice and perspective on what needs to be considered before you apply for any real opportunities.
- Applying for opportunities can be useful exercises even if not successful. The process can aid visibility and your work might be kept on file for future projects. Follow up to get feedback so that you know what to change and improve next time.
- The public art sector is small so making connections and relationships can be very helpful in terms of knowing about opportunities.
- Don't dismiss applying for public art projects if you've never done one. Assess the brief against what you are interested in and what your work deals with. It is not just about experience in the sector.
- When assessing briefs make sure that you understand the budget breakdown and if you don't ask questions. Well-organised projects will allow sufficient time for research and development. Best practice is to split projects into a two stage contractual process paying artists for a 'design phase' and then 'production phase' with a separate materials and installation budget. Splitting the project up like this can militate against risks as projects in the public realm can meet delays, be cancelled or the creative process might not work out.
- Visit the site when putting your proposal together as it can feel very different when you are physically in a space. If you are short-listed and there is a 'design phase' then the producer or commissioner should allow budget to cover the cost of a site visit.
- You need patience and the ability to work with people who might never have worked with artists or within a creative process. Be prepared for discussion and wearing different hats depending on who you are talking to. As the artist hold on to your ideas, but be open to discussion because this can lead to richer outcomes.

- Make sure you are organised and professional. You need to give confidence to people who have never commissioned artworks before.
- Your work will be visible to a broader section of society who will have opinions some of which you might not agree with. Respect people's opinions, but remember you can't please everyone! You might also become open to new ways of looking at things.
- Make sure you are well supported. Public art projects can involve difficult negotiation and working in contexts of conflict. Check who will be working on the project and what roles are being covered. The producer role can be incredibly important here to protect your time and creative vision as the artist, but it might be something you have to cover independently. Think carefully about your initial fee structure and what you need to build in to it. Is the fee reasonable?
- All artists and those working in a freelance capacity in the arts should ensure they have contracts or letters of agreement in place when taking on projects. Public space is a complex area and in some cases can involve large levels of risk so contracts are integral to ensure you are protected against liabilities. There can be grey areas between design, production and installation in terms of where the responsibilities fall i.e. on the artist or the commissioner. Read your contracts incredibly carefully and seek advice to ensure you understand all the clauses you are agreeing to. You should also keep a very detailed paper trail of communication and development – your organisation and administration as an artist is even more important when working in public space. You can join the Federation of Small Businesses for £177 (includes a one off £30 joining fee) per year giving you access to a range of support including legal advice.  
[www.fsb.org.uk](http://www.fsb.org.uk)