

Natural History Museum in Thames Valley Science Park NHM_Unlocked: Public Art Community Engagement and Consultation Strategy

Authored by Create London, 21 August 2025

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1. Introduction

Create London are delighted to have been appointed by the Natural History Museum (NHM) to curate and produce a public art commission for the NHM's Collections, Science and Digitisation Centre in Thames Valley Science Park, part of the NHM's Unlocked Programme. This Public Art Community Engagement and Consultation Strategy follows on from, and is informed by, **part 1 of condition 7, as part of the approved planning application ref: 232995** and the Core Strategy, CP1, Wokingham Borough Design Guide Supplementary Information.

Furthermore, the Public Art Community Engagement and Consultation Strategy has been informed by various documents forming the original planning application and background to the NHM_Unlocked programme, including the Archaeological Evaluation Report, prepared by Wessex Archaeology (Ref: 269871.03, November 2023), the Ecological Impact Assessment Report, prepared by Ecological Planning & Research Limited (Ref: 22/76-2D, November 2023) and a series of on-site and online consultations with identified stakeholders.

We look forward to working closely with the NHM's team, the Council, stakeholders and community members to ensure that the proposed engagement and consultation informs the final commissioned artworks, reflecting the context and heritage of the site while responding to the collections and research of the Natural History Museum. We see great potential for this project to actively contribute to Wokingham Borough Council's arts and cultural strategy to: "... be recognised regionally and nationally as a dynamic cultural hub, a Borough of surprises that delight across all our towns and villages, a Borough where everyone can access or get involved in creating high quality cultural experiences and where creativity is nurtured across all age-groups." We see alignment with five of the six strategic priorities:

1. Enhancing cultural identity and sense of 'place'.

2. Fostering social interaction and community cohesion.
3. Improving health and well-being.
4. Developing opportunities for children and young people.
6. Maximising partnerships and collaboration.

This document outlines our approach to this first phase of the project, which will take place between November 2025 and July 2026. The outcome of the Public Art Community Engagement and Consultation Strategy will inform the final Public Art Strategy, due to be submitted to the Council within three months after the final community engagement session. Ultimately, the engagement and consultation will determine where and how the artwork commission can deliver most impact and value within the designated area, working both in harmony with the architectural and landscaping design and become a distinct element to the wider scheme.

2. The Brief

As the appointed Public Art Consultant, Create London will lead the development and delivery of a comprehensive public art programme for the NHM site, working closely with local stakeholders and Wokingham Borough Council to meet planning obligations and community expectations. Create London's role includes conducting site research, developing the Engagement and Consultation Strategy, and drafting a Public Art Strategy that aligns with local policies and planning requirements.

In addition, Create London will manage the artist selection process, support proposal development and coordinate integration with the broader site construction and operational plan, and oversee the installation of the final artwork prior to occupation, to be retained on site in perpetuity.

The Public Artwork forms part of the project's Section 106 obligations. Prior to development above slab level, the Client (Natural History Museum) is obliged to submit for approval the **Engagement and Consultation Strategy to the Local Planning Authority**. Create London was appointed through a public tender process.

3. Site analysis: current and potential users of the artwork

The Thames Valley is characterised as an area of flat low-lying land, rising to low river terraced hills, and is located near the River Loddon. The site for the NHM project is located between two areas of woodland. To the west is St John's Copse, an area listed as Ancient Semi Natural Woodland and a designated Local Wildlife Site. To the east is New Covert, a more recent plantation, but with a mix of native trees and shrubs. Both woodlands contain populations of Wild Service Tree *Sorbus torminalis*, which is rare in Berkshire.

The surrounding land is still being cultivated for agricultural purposes, and a farm is located near the development site. Recent large-scale developments of Thames Valley Science Park have altered the character and use of the area. Upon entering, you pass the carpark of the 18 large-scale, purpose-built film

studios of Shinfield Studios and the British Museum Archaeological Research Collection. Although not accessible to the public, Shinfield Studios host – at a minimum – four film productions at one time with approximately 700 crew members attached to each production. Adjacent to the studios, the British Museum Archaeological Research Centre is a semi-public space with around 1.3 million objects from the museum’s collection. A destination for researchers, it shares collections with the University of Reading and delivers outreach programmes with local schools and receives scheduled visits from members of the public. Near to the site but separated by the A327 (Eastern Relief Rd) is a housing development in Shinfield. A footbridge can take pedestrians safely across the road and into the Thames Valley Science Park, walking along footpaths and into the woodland.

Currently, the area is used as a site for (dog) walkers from Shinfield and as a site for staff and contractors to take breaks and enjoy the landscape outside the confines of large-scale buildings with little natural light. Shinfield Parish Council has also produced a leaflet with six walking routes around the area. With the expansion of the Thames Valley Science Park, and the new road/pathways completed, there is an opportunity to emphasise the importance of walking and running within the natural landscape. The public artwork on the NHM site can play a key role in expanding the site into an area of interest and education about the environment and the climate emergency. It can emphasise the area as a destination for current users while also attracting more hyperlocal residents from Shinfield as well as visitors from the surrounding areas.

A challenge to consider during the consultation is the fact that the new Collections, Research and Digitisation facility is, for the most part, not a publicly accessible building. The consultation and engagement must manage expectations and explore how the function and knowledge that exist within the building can spill out to the public outdoor spaces and into the landscape. The public benefit of the public artwork needs to be considered carefully during conversations with stakeholders to inform the final artist brief and artwork strategy.

4. Stakeholder mapping and consultation to date

Early-stage mapping of residents, community groups, businesses, schools, places of worship, retail and leisure in the local area is an important first step to understanding who lives, works and plays near the site. A clear framework can then be created that focuses on how to engage with these groups. A stakeholder map has been created to identify stakeholders to consult as part of the Engagement and Consultation Strategy development but also to identify those who will be invited to participate during the engagement and consultation process.

Immediate stakeholders (consultation)

Wokingham Borough Council
Shinfield Parish Council
NHM staff & associates
Collections & Curatorial staff
Learning and National Programmes staff
Front of House staff

Scientific Associates
Library & Archives
NHM Unlocked project team

Neighbours and Peers (learning)

Thames Valley Science Park
University of Reading academics and students
British Museum National Programmes team
Shinfield Studios community engagement staff
Screen Berkshire

Community Engagements

Shinfield Community Church: Social groups, elder's care, parent's group
Whitley Wood Community Centre: Disability support, LGBTQ+ socials
Centrepont Community Centre: 11-18yo Youth Club, Repair Cafe
Wokingham Link Visiting Scheme: Elder's care, community kitchen

School Engagements

Alder Grove Church of England School: Wraparound care, half-term club
Hillside Primary: Scouts group
Shinfield St Mary's Church of England: Ecology and outdoor learning
Geoffrey Field Infant & Juniors: Gardening Club
National Education Nature Park

To inform the Engagement and Consultation Strategy, we have consulted with several immediate stakeholders during July and August 2025. These include:

Nick Fellows, Chief Officer, The Wokingham Volunteer Centre
Nicky Philips, Senior Skills and Employment Manager, Wokingham Borough Council
Ho-Kit Lam, Community Engagement Officer, University of Reading
Julia Hillsdon, Marketing Consultant, Shinfield Studios
Ruby Hornsey, Studio Operations Manager, Shinfield Studios
Emma Hayes, Programme Director: NHM Unlocked & Community Benefit Group Chair
Steve Wetherell, Project Director, NHM Unlocked
Felicia Anderson, Senior Design Development & Construction Project Manager
Lauren Hyams, Head of Learning and National Programmes, Natural History Museum
Tom Bevan, Head of National Programmes, Natural History Museum
Alex Burch, Director of Public Programmes, Natural History Museum
Isabel Davis, Research Leader in Collections and Culture, Natural History Museum
Tim Littlewood, Director of Science (SRO TVSP programme), Natural History Museum

Unfortunately, due to the time of the year with summer leave commitments and prior to the deadline of submitting this document, we were unable to connect with stakeholders/ward councillors from Shinfield Parish Council and a representative from Shinfield St Mary's C.E. Junior School. Furthermore, The British Museum has had a changeover of staff in their national programming

team and were unable to commit to a meeting. However, we consider the consultation phase as iterative, and we will continue to consult relevant stakeholders as they are being recommended by third parties and to keep already consulted individuals and groups in the loop of developments.

5. Engagement and consultation approach

With experience of using both online and in-person engagement strategies, Create London are experts in involving communities constructively and navigating complex discussions in close collaboration with local authority officers. In our experience the engagement must be early, and broad in breadth of reach, as well as deep. To build trust it is important for us to identify and bring on board key community leaders – religious leaders, youth mentors, head teachers, young advocates – from the outset. If they are engaged early on, they become the advocates for the project and ensure that others will feel able and welcome to get involved.

It is important to ensure that everyone in the area is made aware of the project and opportunities to get involved: Flyers, invitations to creative workshops, social media and posters are important to spreading the word and allowing people who are interested to step forward. We have built relationships with partners locally, who are able to spread the word on our behalf, this includes inclusion in the Shinfield Studio's community newsletter, through the Wokingham Volunteer Centre and Avocado Property to name a few. Our ongoing update and reporting to the Community Benefit Group will also ensure that opportunities are communicated to relevant groups, schools and the University of Reading.

Within the broader theme of the natural environment and climate emergency, we will employ sculptural, architectural and pictorial artistic methods to create a diversity of engagement opportunity with the site's legacy and contemporary relevance. We also wish to lean into the strategy of "citizen science" to create moments of outdoor engagement and learning that builds on research strategies of the Natural History Museum. We plan to both **consult** with individuals and groups during the period of research and the development of an artist brief and to **engage** them through creative activities that will inform the design and making of the works with the appointed artist.

Our methodology includes regular feedback loops, so that all those involved understand how their ideas are being taken forward. The engagement must also be clear about what is already pre-determined and therefore is simply information sharing, and where ideas are open ended and can be shaped by feedback.

We wish to collaborate with existing local institutions such as schools, places of worship and care facilities as this can be a way to ensure that children, those in care and the elderly can engage too. We have identified several opportunities for partnerships when delivering engagement sessions, tapping into existing relationships and resources, while also ensuring that we reach residents with various learning needs and abilities. These are listed below as part of the six sessions we are committed to delivering from **November 2025 to July 2026**. Our

main tools for engaging schools are through the National Education Nature Park and University of Reading's existing relationship with St Mary's C.E. Junior School.

While the main objective of the Engagement and Consultation Strategy is to inform the Public Art Strategy, we see this work as a way of building warm relationships with the Shinfield community and understanding their needs before the new Collections, Research and Digitisation facility opens in 2031.

Finally, during the construction phase of the artwork, we will build in time to provide updates to stakeholders through email updates, and we will organise site tours at appropriate times to sustain their interest and advocacy. Once an artist has been appointed, we will conduct a further three sessions with residents and stakeholders to feed into the artistic development process. The scope of these sessions will depend on the chosen artist and their artistic practice.

6. Session timeline

As we wish to remain flexible and responsive in our approach, we have kept one session open. Building synergies with existing organisations and grassroots groups is an ongoing process and we want to ensure that opportunities for collaboration and engagement with new user groups can be accommodated.

Nov 2025	Public project presentation (pop up) at the School Green and Shinfield Library
Dec 2026	Public event/creative workshop/art competition, in partnership with Shinfield Studios, as part of their Christmas lights
Mar 2026	TBC
Apr 2026	Citizen science session for various age groups, with Natural History Museum
May 2026	Outdoor Classroom Day, in partnership with National Education Nature Park
July 2026	National Meadows Day, in partnership with University of Reading

The above timeline represents only the engagement period of the project. Please refer to Appendix 2 for an overview of the entire project period, covering the time period of January 2025 to December 2027.

Appendix 1: About Create London

With 14 years' experience of working in London boroughs with high levels of multiple deprivation, within social housing estates, regeneration and contested heritage, Create London is uniquely placed to deliver the heritage plan and art commissions for the Peabody development at the former HMP Holloway site. Create London has specialist expertise in working sensitively with communities who historically have little prior engagement with the arts and in commissioning and supporting artists to work in community settings, sometimes for the first time. Leading several art and heritage programmes from conception, through collaborative bid writing to commissioning and delivery, this work has included:

Hackney Windrush Art Commissions and Public Programme

Veronica Ryan's celebratory giant fruit are a lesson in how to do public sculpture well

The Independent ★★★★★

Hackney Windrush Commission review: a sublime, spectacular honouring of a generation and their descendants

The Telegraph ★★★★★

Working closely with Hackney Council, the highly acclaimed Hackney Windrush Art Commissions saw two significant permanent artworks by Black British artists Veronica Ryan and Thomas J Price installed in central Hackney and secured the 2022 Turner Prize for Veronica Ryan. The commissions were accompanied by an 18-month public programme that engaged with community elders, schoolchildren, teachers and, through careful collaborations with grassroots organisations, included satellite commissions for local artists, a photography exhibition, schools' resources, the collection and dissemination of personal and community histories and a huge sense of pride in and ownership of the resulting artworks.

Two murals for Brent London Borough of Culture

Create London conceived and delivered a cultural programme within the major housing and infrastructure project that focussed on the industrial and heritage of Park Royal. The output resulted in two mural commissions for Brent London Borough of Culture, with artists Pio Abad and (in partnership with Studio Voltaire) Dawn Mellor.

Becontree Estate Centenary 2021

Create London curated and delivered an ambitious programme for the centenary of the Becontree Estate in Dagenham, funded by the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The programme invited artists to explore the histories of Becontree, working with groups of residents to create new works in film, sound, sculpture and performance. Over 20 artists participated in the programme; Abbas Zahedi worked with young women's spoken voice collective Raised Voices to produce work based on the neolithic Dagenham Idol and locally born artist Joy Labinjo borrowed treasured photos from residents to create a mural for Dagenham Heathway.

Holloway Park Commissions 2024-ongoing

Create London is currently curating and producing three new public artworks as part of Peabody's Holloway Park redevelopment in the London Borough of Islington. Working with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system, the work will reflect the history of HMP Holloway, the largest prison for women in Europe that closed its doors in 2016.

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Appendix 2: Indicative Project Timeline

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