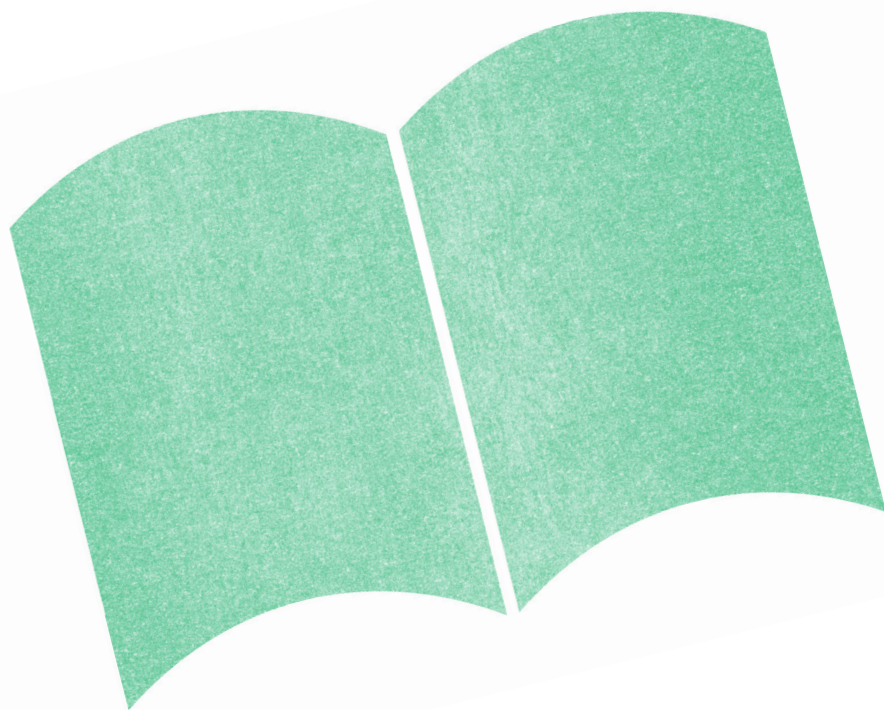


OPEN BRIEF
WRITING
FOR ART
IN PUBLIC
SPACE:

PRINCIPLES
AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION



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Brief Writing Workshops held at Wandsworth Town Hall (28th May 2025) and The Royal College of Art (8th June 2025) explored the practice of developing open and flexible briefs in the commissioning of public art, architecture, and community projects.

The starting point was the recognition that conventional briefs often over-determine outcomes, closing down the possibilities for creativity and collaboration. The workshop participants — Kate Batchelor, Larry Botchway, Nancy Collinge, Grace Crannis, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Jade Morgan and Anna Vickery - discussed how briefs might instead be framed as tools for research, engagement, and adaptive practice. The workshops were developed through an AHRC funded Impact Fellowship led by Jaspar Joseph-Lester in partnership with Wandsworth Council titled: *Art and Urban Change: live exchange as a method for policy development.*

The starting point for the workshops was a series of questions:

- How to write a brief that gives artists enough to go on but does not over determine the output?
- What is the process for developing a brief?
- How to build good practice into strategic areas of work and policy?
- Which disciplines and methods of art practice are included or excluded, how do briefs remain broad?
- How does good practice move beyond expectation to requirement – in terms of thinking, making and commenting?
- How does the brief relate to place? How does this process help to develop new understanding of what place means?

A core theme was the tension between clarity and openness. A brief must establish the scope of work, define responsibilities, and ensure accountability, yet it must not constrain the artistic process. Several participants argued that the most successful projects emerged when briefs described

values, desired impacts, and modes of working rather than prescribing outputs. The aim is not to instruct an artist what to make but to invite them into a process of dialogue and exchange.

The workshop stressed that good briefs should embed process, not just product. Research time, site visits, and opportunities for dialogue with local communities should be written into the brief as essential phases of work. This ensures that projects are responsive to place and context rather than imported or imposed. One participant described this as a commitment to “presentness” — cultivating the skill of paying active attention to what emerges during the commission.

Historical precedents were raised, particularly the Artist Placement Group of the 1960s and 70s, which pioneered the notion of the “incidental person”: the artist embedded in non-art settings to open up new ways of thinking. The relevance today lies in commissioning artists not simply to decorate

or provide a final object, but to act as agents of inquiry, linking departments, surfacing hidden stories, and shaping collective understanding.

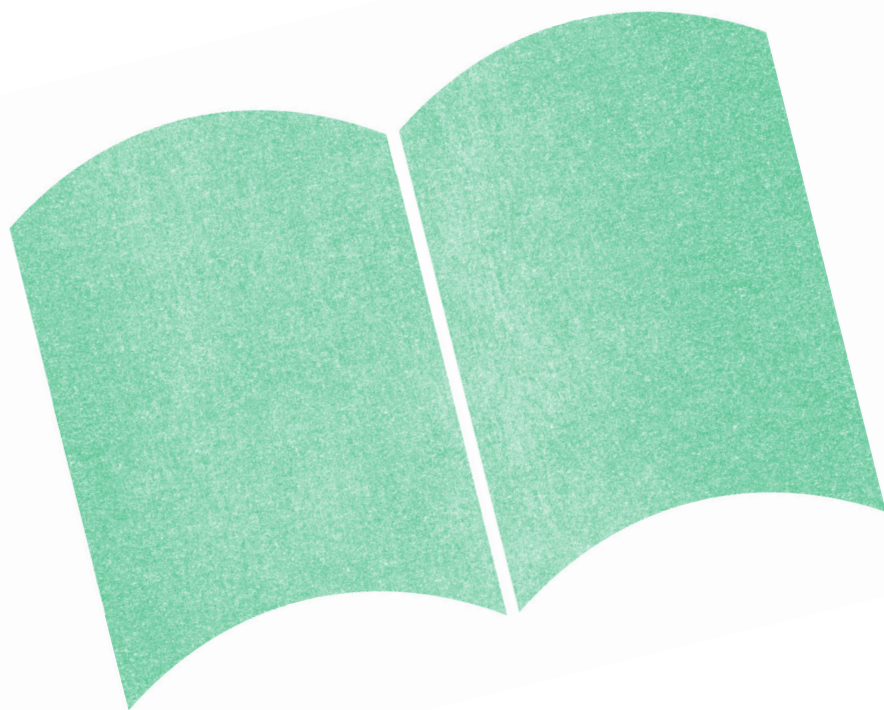
Practical constraints inevitably shape the brief. Local authorities work within election cycles, financial pressures, and timeframes often dictated by planning and development schedules. Some projects require fast, visible results — murals, installations, or performances that signal change — while others benefit from long, research-led processes. A flexible framework is therefore required, one that can support different tempos and scales without losing sight of core principles.

The workshop also identified significant gaps in current practice. Many officers and commissioners rely on personal experience, ad hoc examples, or informal peer networks when drafting briefs. There is no shared library of model briefs or good practice guidance within most councils. This leads to duplication of effort and uneven quality.

Participants argued for the creation of an accessible repository of case studies and templates, alongside training opportunities, to raise confidence and consistency.

Early engagement and embodied research were repeatedly highlighted. Walking with stakeholders, spending time in the locality, and experiencing sites first-hand often shift project proposals in productive directions. Collaborations between local authorities and institutions such as the Royal College of Art show that when artists are brought in early and allowed to explore context, both the outcomes and the learning processes are enriched.

PRINCIPLES



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From these discussions, the workshop drew out a set of working principles for good practice in brief writing. These were not presented as rigid rules but as recurring themes that can be adapted to context.

First, briefs should clearly articulate the context and need. Commissioners must explain why a project is being initiated, what pressures or opportunities it responds to, and how it relates to the wider environment of policy, planning, or community life. A strong sense of context helps artists situate their work and ensures that outputs are meaningful rather than tokenistic.

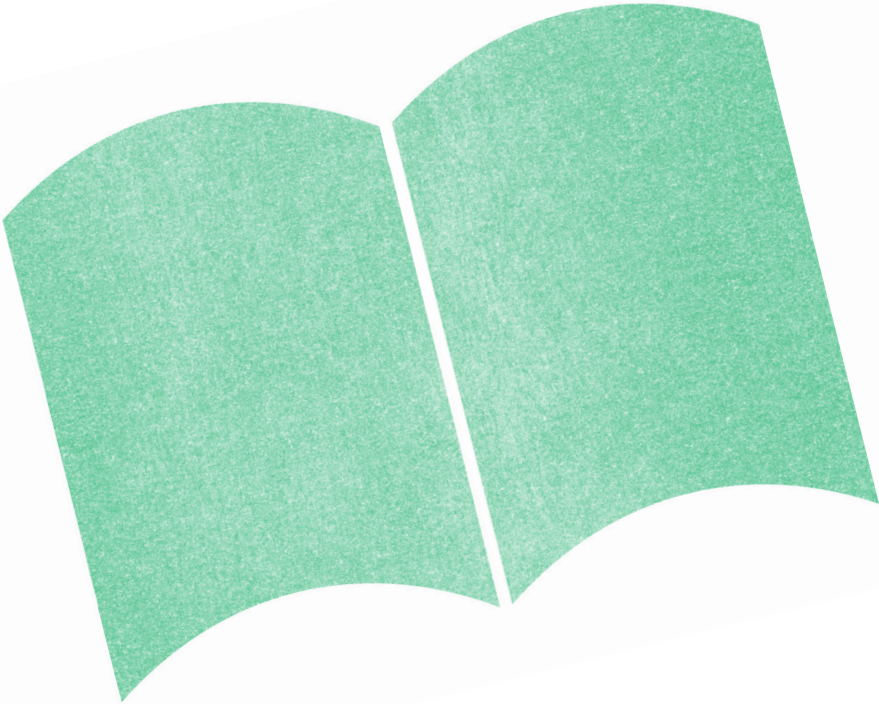
Second, the approach must match the opportunity. Not all projects require the same methodology. A short-term event may benefit from a highly visible, celebratory commission, while a long-term regeneration project may be better served by a slow, research-led inquiry. Briefs should not impose the wrong tempo or scale but should invite proposals that align with the opportunity.

Third, the process of commissioning must be fair and sustainable. Artists should be properly paid for research and development time, and the selection process should be transparent. Several participants highlighted the risk of “speculative labour” where artists are asked to submit unpaid proposals. Good practice demands that the labour of idea generation is recognised and remunerated. Fourth, there must be space for feedback and iteration. Too often, briefs assume a linear process culminating in delivery. In reality, projects benefit when there are loops of reflection, dialogue, and adjustment. Commissioners should plan time and resources for midway reviews, community input, and adaptive changes.

Finally, the brief must balance openness with clarity. Artists need to know the boundaries of budget, timeframe, and responsibilities, but within those limits they should be free to explore and shape the outcome. One participant described this as “clear scaffolding, not tight choreography.” The brief is a structure to support creativity, not a script to be followed.

The workshop also mapped out the different types of commission currently encountered. At one end are projects that are primarily process-led and may leave behind little visible trace, such as knowledge exchange, workshops, or networks. At the other are time-limited public realm works — sculptures, murals, performances — which provide immediate impact. A third category is research or documentary outputs, such as publications, films, or archives. Participants noted that some projects evolve from one type to another over time, and that briefs must allow this flexibility rather than locking in a single format.

GOVERNANCE



GOVERNANCE

Attention also turned to the role of policy and governance. Participants argued that policy frameworks can either enable or obstruct good commissioning. For example, some councils default to commissioning murals as quick wins, even where more integrated or exploratory approaches would be more appropriate. If policy explicitly values process, engagement, and context, it provides cover for officers to commission in more experimental ways.

A recurring idea was the creation of area frameworks or masterplans that go beyond individual briefs. In many boroughs, different teams or developers commission works in isolation, leading to a fragmented public realm. A framework could set shared principles, ensure consistency, and prevent duplication. It could also establish expectations that every commission involves site visits, community dialogue, and attention to accessibility and sustainability.

The language used in briefs was another concern. Words such as “consultation” or

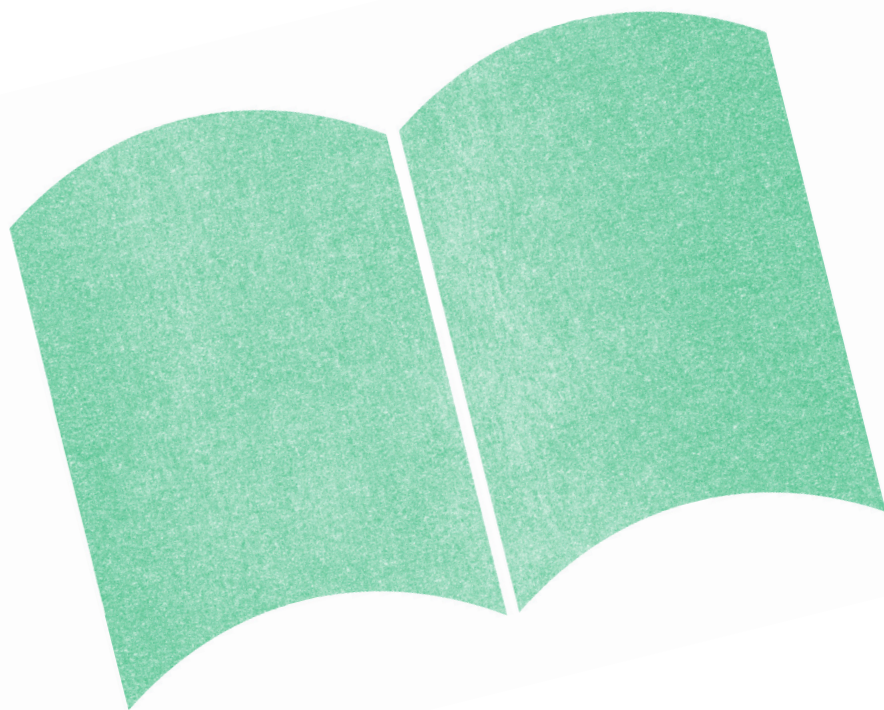
“co-design” are often deployed without clarity about what they mean in practice. Participants stressed the need for honesty: if a project is not genuinely co-designed, the brief should not pretend that it is. Similarly, claims about impact should be realistic and proportionate. Over-promising undermines trust.

The question of delivery and oversight was emphasised. A well-drafted brief can still fail if there is no one to carry it through, to liaise with artists, and to manage changes on the ground. Commissioners often face staff turnover, restructures, or political shifts that disrupt continuity. Participants suggested that briefs should identify not only the task but also who is responsible for stewarding the project from start to finish.

The workshop recognised that commissioning is not only a technical matter but also a form of relationship building. Artists and communities must feel that their voices matter, while officers must feel supported by policy and colleagues. Trust is built when commitments

made in a brief are honoured in practice. For this reason, evaluation and documentation are vital. Recording what worked and what failed ensures that lessons are carried forward rather than lost when staff move on.

PRACTICE



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The discussion then shifted to the skills and capacities required of those writing and managing briefs. Commissioners need not only administrative competence but also cultural literacy, sensitivity to context, and the ability to broker relationships. Several participants noted that officers are often expected to manage complex creative projects without training or peer support. A shared library of resources, mentoring, and cross-borough exchange could significantly strengthen capacity.

Participants reflected on the importance of early-phase engagement. Site visits, walking tours, and informal conversations were seen as more valuable than lengthy written documents in the initial stages. These embodied encounters provide artists with nuanced understandings that cannot be conveyed in text alone. Briefs that build in such activities demonstrate respect for place and community.

Examples were shared of collaborations with educational institutions, such as the Royal

College of Art, where students and artists were paired with local authority officers. These projects highlighted the potential of mutual learning: officers gained exposure to creative methodologies, while artists deepened their understanding of public processes. Such exchanges help demystify commissioning on both sides and can be formalised into ongoing partnerships.

EVALUATION AND LEGACY

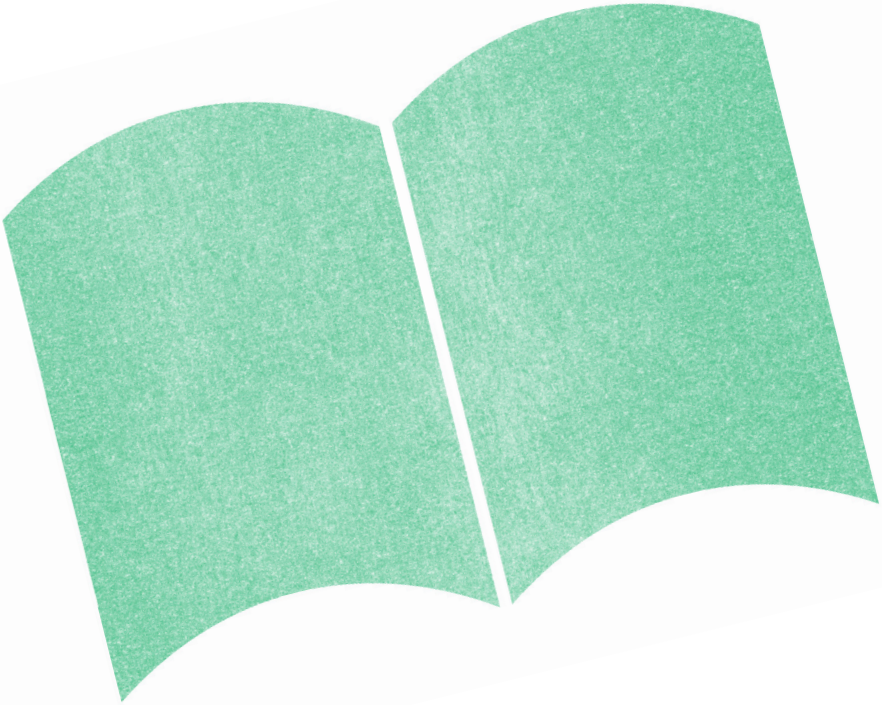
Another strand of conversation concerned evaluation and legacy. Too often, once a project is delivered, documentation is minimal and learning is lost. Participants argued for a systematic approach to capturing not only outputs but also processes, challenges, and unintended consequences. A central archive of briefs, reports, and case studies could inform future practice and reduce duplication of mistakes.

The workshop identified risks of instrumentalisation: the danger that artists are brought in only to serve predetermined agendas, such as branding or political

messaging. While it is legitimate for projects to align with policy goals, there must also be room for independent perspectives. A well-written brief negotiates this balance, making space for critique and alternative narratives rather than reducing art to decoration.

Finally, there was recognition that different scales of commissioning require different approaches and evaluation. Small, fast projects can act as testing grounds, while larger infrastructure-linked commissions may shape the public realm for decades. The challenge is to ensure that learning flows between these levels, and that smaller experiments are not dismissed as trivial but valued as part of an ecology of practice.

CHECKLIST



CHECKLIST

The group began drafting a working checklist of elements that make for a strong open brief. This included:

- A clear statement of context and rationale for the commission.
- Defined parameters of budget, timescale, and available support.
- An invitation to research and engage with the site and its communities.
- Payment for research and development, avoiding unpaid speculative work.
- Clarity about responsibilities for delivery, liaison, and long-term maintenance.
- Space for iteration, feedback, and adaptation as projects evolve.
- Honest language about the level of participation and co-design.
- Consideration of legacy, documentation, and evaluation.

This list was not seen as exhaustive but as a practical starting point. By including such elements, briefs can support both creativity and accountability.

There was also discussion of different audiences for briefs. While artists are the primary readers, briefs are often circulated internally within councils or to funding bodies. They therefore need to operate on multiple levels: inspiring to artists, reassuring to managers, and clear to financial officers. The best briefs combine accessible language with enough detail to satisfy all these stakeholders.

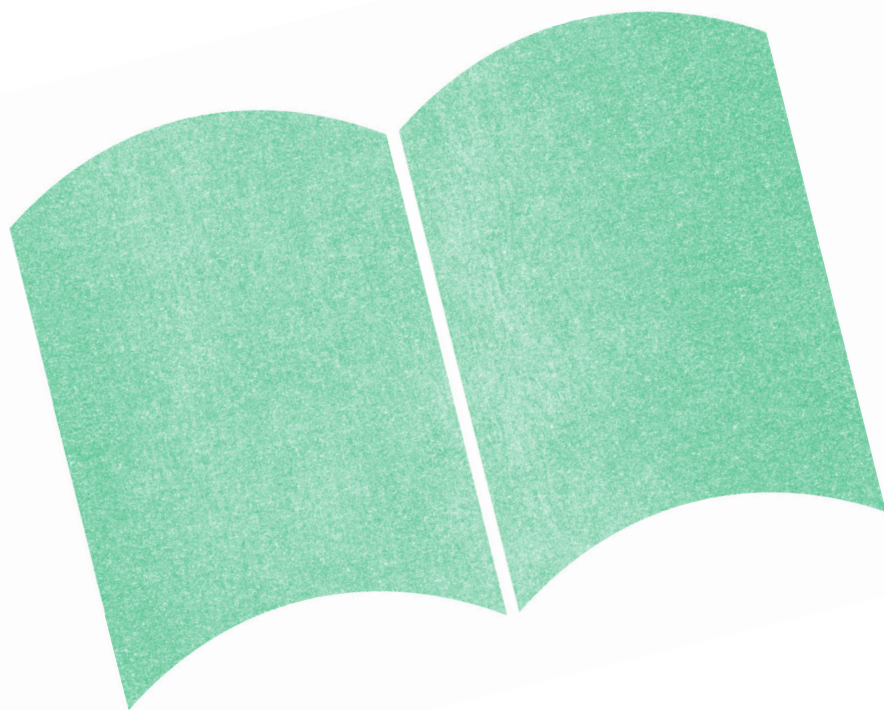
The group noted the value of iterative drafting. A brief might begin as a short outline, expand through dialogue with partners, and only later solidify into a formal document. This flexibility reduces the pressure to “get it right first time” and acknowledges that good commissioning is a learning process.

Attention was also paid to equity and access. Briefs should avoid jargon, be transparent about opportunities, and ensure that artists from diverse backgrounds can participate. Some councils have experimented with commissioning in stages, allowing emerging

practitioners to gain experience without being excluded by high entry thresholds.

Finally, participants highlighted the emotional dimension of commissioning. Artists often invest significant personal energy, and officers may feel vulnerable when advocating for experimental approaches. Recognising these affective dimensions — through supportive dialogue, fair pay, and realistic expectations — helps sustain goodwill and motivation.

IMPACT



IMPACT

The closing session of the workshop drew out the wider implications of better brief writing. The group agreed that briefs are not neutral technical documents but powerful instruments that shape practice, relationships, and public outcomes. A poorly written brief can waste resources, frustrate artists, and erode community trust. A well-written one can open new possibilities, foster collaboration, and leave lasting value.

Key recommendations emerging from the workshop included:

1. Develop a shared library of briefs and case studies across councils and organisations, reducing duplication and raising standards.
2. Formalise training and peer exchange for officers, ensuring that commissioning is recognised as a skilled practice requiring support.
3. Embed process in policy, making site visits, group walks, research phases, and community dialogue a requirement rather than optional.

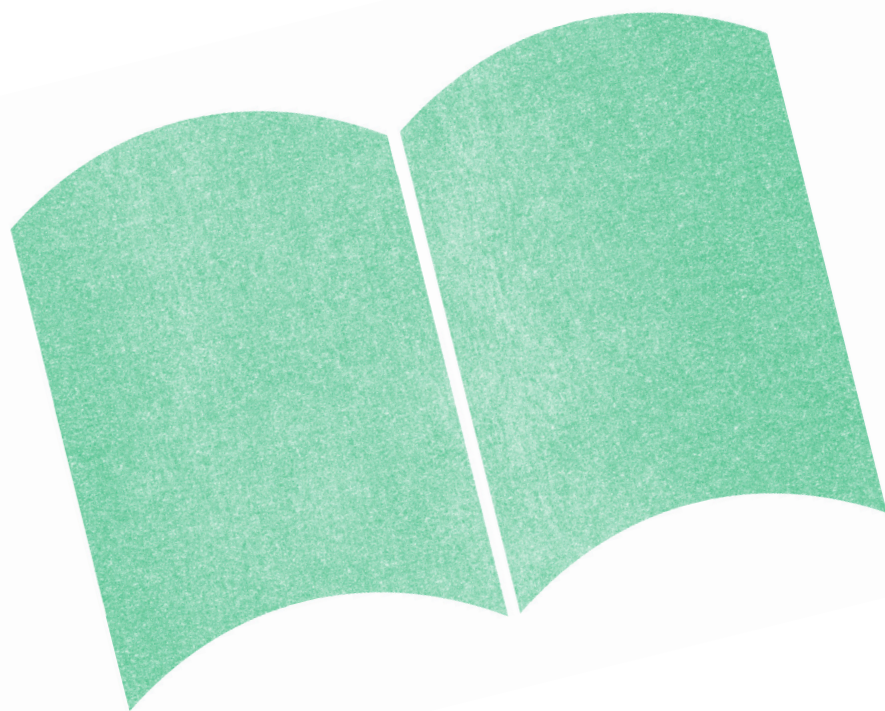
4. Balance short-term visibility with long-term impact, valuing both quick interventions and slow research.
5. Ensure fairness and equity, paying artists properly and making opportunities accessible across experience levels.
6. Plan for documentation and legacy, creating an archive of learning that outlasts individual projects or political cycles.

The group noted that while resources are constrained, these recommendations are less about new expenditure than about shifting priorities: valuing process, context, and learning as much as output.

The workshop ended with a reflection on the ethos of openness. An open brief does not mean vagueness; it means setting a framework within which unexpected things can happen. It means trusting artists and communities to bring insight, while providing the scaffolding of clarity and support. It is about cultivating attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect.

The legacy of the workshop itself was seen not only in the notes and checklists but also in the relationships formed among participants. Commissioners, artists, and academics left with a stronger sense of shared purpose and mutual support. By continuing to meet, exchange, and refine practice, they can ensure that brief writing becomes a live, evolving craft rather than a bureaucratic chore.

BIOGRAPHIES



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Open Brief Writing for Art in Public Space: Principles and Practice is then an articulation of a vision of commissioning as a collaborative, adaptive, and principled practice. The brief is both a tool and a symbol of this vision: concise yet open, structured yet flexible, pragmatic yet imaginative. When written with care, it has the power to unlock projects that are not only effective but also deeply connected to people and place.

Kate Batchelor, Head of Place Programme, Wandsworth Council.

Nancy Collinge, Engagement Planner, Richmond and Wandsworth Councils.

Grace Crannis is a designer, strategist and policy maker working in the middle of civic systems, culture and the public realm.

Through her role as Planning Engagement Lead at Richmond and Wandsworth Councils, she works to enable more diverse participation with the planning system and bring creative practice to policy design. Grace is co-founder of design studio Syrup and is an Associate

Lecturer at University of the Arts London (UAL). She holds an MA in Information Experience Design from the Royal College of Art and is a trustee of Turf Projects, Croydon's homegrown artist space.

Larry Botchway is an architect, planning engagement officer and co-founder of POoR (Power Out of Restriction) Collective, a socially minded art and design studio. Named one of RIBA's Rising Stars, he specialises in placemaking, architectural design and urban strategy, with experience working alongside public sector organisations including Hackney, Southwark, Lambeth, Bexley and Basildon councils. Larry is also a Professional Practice Tutor at the Architectural Association. His work focuses on expanding participation in the built environment and ensuring that marginalised voices are centred in the design and planning of places.

Jaspar Joseph-Lester is a London-based artist, researcher, and educator. His practice explores the contested ideological frameworks embedded in modernity,

urban renewal, regeneration, and social organisation, investigating how artistic practice can reshape the masterplans, policies, and regeneration processes that determine the cultural life of cities. He has exhibited internationally and is the editor of several peer-reviewed books on urban walking, including *Walking Cities: London* (Routledge, 2020), *Walking in Cities: Navigating Post-pandemic Urban Environments* (Routledge, 2024), and *Walking as Method: Spatial Justice, Policy Development and Social Change* (Routledge, forthcoming 2027). He is also the author of *Revisiting the Bonaventure Hotel* (Copy Press, 2012). Joseph-Lester is Professor of Critical Spatial Practice and Head of Programme, MA Sculpture, at the Royal College of Art.

Jade Morgan is a Cultural Place-shaping Manager at Wandsworth Council. She leverages arts and culture to create vibrant and inclusive living environments, within the Winstanley Estates regeneration and more recently the Nine Elms Development.

Her work encompasses curating events and festivals, supporting local cultural initiatives and connecting residents with borough-wide programmes. Jade is also the founder of BaseGap, a community dedicated to democratising design, architecture and place-shaping. With a background in Interior Architecture and Spatial Design (BA) and Events, Festivals and Exhibitions Management (MA), she brings a unique blend of spatial expertise and passion for accessible cultural engagement.

Anna Vickery is the Strategic Lead for Cultural Placeshaping in the Arts & Culture Service at Wandsworth Council. She develops strategic partnerships, projects and commissions and advises on arts and planning policy. Anna has a background in curating with a focus on commissioning and is interested in the possibilities of practice through partnership, research, engagement, and discussion. She is an Associate Lecturer at University of the Arts London (UAL) and has experience of working with artists, communities, galleries, and museums to develop projects and commissions

in public spaces. Anna holds an MA in Fine Art (Staffordshire University) and MA in Curating Contemporary Art (Goldsmiths).



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