

# Sheffield Visual Arts Group (SVAG)

## Newsletter December 2022

Welcome to Sheffield Visual Arts Group! Time has come for us to keep people better informed about who we are, our purposes, and what we are up to

### Manifesto

We campaign to promote and celebrate Sheffield's outstanding visual arts, at a regional and national level.

The City of Sheffield owns an internationally recognised collection of 20th-century paintings and works on paper, as well as a huge array of other treasures. We want to improve access to this vibrant collection.

Our group wants the economic and cultural importance of Sheffield's extraordinary art to be reflected in local and national policymaking, and ultimately for Sheffield to have the pioneering cultural centre for the arts which it deserves.

### Where we stand

The Visual Arts Group came together originally when the existence of the Graves Art Gallery was threatened, back in 2011. Finding long-term solutions for the protection and accessible display of Sheffield's major art collections is inseparable from support for a wide range of contemporary art practices; both are fundamental to the future life of the City. Together we should be developing networks of interested parties, practitioners, communities etc. in order to be as inclusive as possible in our planning. Public engagement is vital.

## **Sheffield Visual Arts Group Objectives:**

- To promote the city's outstanding collection of visual art
- To improve access to the city's collections and to expand these collections
- To develop, with others, a long-term strategy for the arts relevant to all the citizens of Sheffield

## **Sheffield Public Artworks Project (SPAR)**

Our collaboration with Wessex Archaeology this year has been a major part of our outreach activity.

This has been to map the whereabouts of public artworks, to describe them and to make the records available to the public online. Volunteers were out there, doing the business, and the results are viewable here: [www.wessexarch.co.uk/sheffieldpublicart](http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/sheffieldpublicart)

The first stage of the project is complete. The second stage is now in process – and looking for volunteers (you??): “ Now, the team behind the Sheffield Public Artworks Map wants the eagle-eyed people of Sheffield to come forward with suggestions of lesser-known artworks that haven’t yet been added to the map ”

## **Arts Council monies for Sheffield**

There are mixed feelings about the monies recently announced for Sheffield by the Arts Council. Sheffield Museums has been awarded £814,720 for each year from 2023 to 2026 – awards that have been welcomed by Kim Streets, Director of Sheffield Museums. Dan Bates of Sheffield Theatres has also welcomed their award, of £1,303,415 for each of those years.

The Arts Council has been seen to be responding to government prompting to make sure that there is a better balance between funding across the country with less focus on London. So when it was announced that altogether, Sheffield organisations would be receiving more than £3m annually, this looked like a good deal for Sheffield and was welcomed. However, further analysis reported by David Kessen in the Sheffield Star showed that Leeds was being promised £35.65 per head of population, compared to Sheffield's £6.23. And Manchester's per capita is £44.41. Liverpool awarded £20.02 per head, Hull £11.44

Sheffield MPs Gill Furniss, Clive Betts and Paul Blomfield have expressed concern about this disparity and are asking for explanations.

Of course Leeds and Manchester do host very large organisations – Opera North in Leeds and in Manchester, their International Festival. Sheffield does not have comparator organisations.

But we have been concerned for some time about Sheffield's lack of a strong cultural strategy: we wrote to ask the Council in January: *'When will the Council agree its strategy for Arts, Culture and Heritage in the City? Not having such a strategy has led (for example) to a failure to propose a culture solution for the John Lewis building, and to resolve the issue of the renovation/refurbishment of the Central Library/Graves Gallery building. The future of both these buildings needs to be resolved, and quickly.'*

They adopted the Culture Collective outline as the City Council's interim strategy, in September of this year. It is a move in the right direction but is relatively modest. Sheffield again not shouting loudly enough for itself! We think a much more ambitious approach is needed. Certainly something the Arts Council takes into account when deciding where to allocate monies.

So we were glad to hear at a meeting arranged by ourselves with Cllr Martin Smith, who chairs the Council's Economic Development and Skills Policy Committee, accompanied by Rebecca Maddox, that the city is committed to developing its own, detailed and comprehensive, culture strategy and is seeking the funding to enable this. This is very welcome news and we look forward to a much more ambitious approach than we have seen before.

Watch this space!

## **Surrey Street building: Central Library and Graves Art Gallery**

Another issue that we have spent quite a bit of time on!

***Our View*** For a long time, the future of the Graves building has been up for debate, in need of major repair and refurbishment. We have campaigned continuously for the Graves Gallery for over 10 years, and understand the issues surrounding it. We had hoped that the John Lewis building, owned by the City Council and situated in the heart of the city, would provide an opportunity for a new solution.

That building is located in the central 'Culture Corridor': that large sweep of cultural provision, from Shoreham Street to the City Hall. The 'Corridor' includes the largest concentration of performance stages and galleries and exhibition spaces outside London, as well as the central library. The council promised in 2017-18 to find a new library site in the heart of the city, and made a commitment to developing the Graves building as a 'landmark arts building'.

The suggestion we made in January this year was to move the Central Library to the John Lewis building. And to then turn the Graves Building into an arts and culture centre, very much in line with John Graves's intentions. The enlarged Gallery could be moved to the ground floor,

with level access provided via Tudor Square, and with a cafe at that level. A variety of other cultural functions could be accommodated within the building: studios spaces; meeting rooms for arts and culture enterprises; a culture space for children; commercial space for arts businesses. The recent success of the Print Market in the Millennium Gallery is an example of how significant a role that partnership between the public and private sector can be. We need to develop more of it.

It would have been an ambitious project and would need wide public commitment and serious resources. But the gains for the city would have been enormous. And well worth the energy and commitments needed.

Sadly, the Council's strategy seems to have been just to find someone, probably a developer, they can sell the John Lewis building to. It was the successful application for listing status by "Joined Up Heritage Sheffield" that has so far delayed that process, with, as we understand it, some of the developers pulling out.

So we have not yet seen how the building on Surrey Street can be repaired and developed and increased in its use by the public: a major sadness for culture in Sheffield.

Another space to watch!

## **Musings**

Each month, one of our team shares their personal perspective on their experience. November, it was Robert Scott's turn. December, Vicky Seddon's. Here it is:

[www.sheffieldvisualartsgroup.co.uk/art-musings/](http://www.sheffieldvisualartsgroup.co.uk/art-musings/)

And the Musings from previous months are here:

[www.sheffieldvisualartsgroup.co.uk/our-past-interests-and-activities/archived-art-musings/](http://www.sheffieldvisualartsgroup.co.uk/our-past-interests-and-activities/archived-art-musings/)

## How we work

We continue to campaign, lobby and influence by writing occasional papers, letters and emails to: the Arts Council, art and cultural organisations and charities; MPs; South Yorkshire Region Mayoral Combined Authority officials; City councillors, Council officers, Local Area Committees and the press, community newsletters etc.

We network widely, and are members of “Joined Up Heritage Sheffield” (JUHS). We have an active partnership with Wessex Archaeology over the Sheffield Public Art Recording (SPAR) project. We attend relevant meetings of JUHS and SPAR and report back to our own monthly group meetings.

In addition we initiate our own occasional public meetings in the form of Study Days.

We hope you will find our newsletters of interest. We welcome your comments and suggestions

Not of interest? Just let us know and we will remove you from our mailing list

Kind Regards

**Sheffield Visual Arts Group**

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