

Committee(s): Culture, Heritage and Libraries – For Decision	Dated: 08/12/25
Subject: City Arts Initiative – Recommendations to the Committee	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	Vibrant Thriving Destination & Flourishing Public Spaces
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
If so, how much?	n/a
What is the source of Funding?	n/a
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?	n/a
Report of: Gregory Moore, Deputy Town Clerk	For Decision
Report author: Emma Markiewicz, Head of Profession (Culture) Joanna Parker, Principal Planning Officer, Environment	

Summary

This report presents the recommendations of the City Arts Initiative (CAI) which met on 24 July 2025. At this meeting CAI considered the following proposals:

1. Francis Barber Blue Plaque
2. George Sandeman & Co Blue Plaque
3. John Amos Comenius Blue Plaque

Recommendation(s)

CAI recommends that members of the Culture, Heritage and Libraries Committee are asked to:

1. Approve the Francis Barber Blue Plaque Proposal
2. Approve the George Sandeman & Co Blue Plaque Proposal
3. Reject the John Amos Comenius Blue Plaque Proposal

Any approval is also subject to any additional necessary permissions gained from environmental health, planning and highways.

Main Report

Background

1. The City Arts Initiative (CAI) met on 6 November 2025 to consider the proposals outlined below.

2. At the Culture, Heritage and Libraries (CHL) Committee meeting on 20 May 2024, Members approved the CAI's recommendations on the delegated authority criteria for CAI applications. Items 1 to 3 require referral to the CHL Committee for decision as they are blue plaques.
3. Blue plaque applications are administered by the Heritage Estates Team (within the City Surveyor's Department) and reviewed by the CAI panel with the panel recommendation ratified by the CHL Committee. Applications for new blue plaques in the City are currently paused whilst the backlog of applications are cleared. An update on the blue plaque programme and proposed changes to process is expected at the 19 January 2026 CHL committee.
4. The backlog has now been reduced, in addition to the three plaque proposals above, there is now just one application remaining from the backlog which is expected to come to the next CAI panel meeting.
5. Further background information is available in appendices below. Full details of all the applications to the CAI are available on request from the Cultural Policy & Partnerships Officer (katie.whitbourn@cityoflondon.gov.uk).

Proposals

Francis Barber Blue Plaque

6. The CAI received an application from Dr Johnson's House for a blue plaque to be placed at 17 Gough Square, EC4A 3DE to commemorate the location of where Francis Barber lived from 1752-1756. See appendix 1 and 2 for more details.
7. Francis Barber was born into slavery in Jamaica around 1742 and brought to England as a child. He later became a servant, close companion and heir to the writer and lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson. Educated under Johnson's guidance, Barber gained his freedom and went on to become a respected member of London society. His life represents one of the earliest and most well-documented examples of a formerly enslaved Black man achieving independence and literacy in 18th-century Britain.
8. 17 Gough Square is a grade I listed building and listed building consent will be required. The applicants have already had a site visit and discussion with the City of London planning team and Historic England to detail the design and placement of the plaque to ensure it has equal prominence to the plaque that already exists at the house for Dr Johnson.
9. Historical checks have been completed to confirm the location is accurate and The London Archives have confirmed this information to be correct.
10. The CAI recommends that this proposal is approved subject to necessary permissions being gained.

George Sandeman & Co Blue Plaque

11. The CAI received an application from Liberty Wines for a blue plaque to be placed at 20 St Swithin's Lane, EC4N 8AD to commemorate the opening of George Sandeman & Co and it's first London office which opened in 1790. See appendix 3 and 4 for more details.
12. George Sandeman was a young Scottish merchant who began trading in port and sherry wines between London, Portugal, and Spain. Sandeman & Co was one of the earliest firms to professionalise the wine import trade in Britain.
13. 20 St Swithin's Lane is a grade II listed building and listed building consent will be required.
14. Historical checks have been completed to confirm the location is accurate and The London Archives have confirmed this information to be correct.
15. The CAI recommends that this proposal is approved subject any necessary permissions being gained.

John Amos Comenius Blue Plaque

16. The CAI received an application from Czech School for a blue plaque to be placed in the area around Mitre street, St James's Passage and Dukes Place (thought to be the location of Samuel Hartlib's House) to commemorate the Czech philosopher and educator John Amos Comenius. See appendix 5 and 6 for more details.
17. John Amos Comenius is believed to have stayed in London between 1640-41 as part of his European travels promoting educational reform. Historical sources suggest that he may have resided at or near the house of Samuel Hartlib in Aldgate.
18. The London Archives have not been able to verify a specific City of London address for the time Comenius was in London, nor how long he was in the City of London for.
19. The CAI recommends that this proposal is rejected due to the lack of clear evidence to confirm the location or length of time that Comenius spent in the City of London.

General comments

20. The CAI also noted the importance of diversifying the current range of blue plaques in the Square Mile and highlighting broader stories (e.g. Women, BAME, LGBTQ+) and agreed that this should be prioritised in the next iteration of the blue plaque programme.

Options

21. The City Arts Initiative asks the Culture, Heritage and Libraries Committee to approve the CAI recommendations for:
- a. Francis Barber Blue Plaque
 - b. George Sandeman & Co Blue Plaque

To reject the proposal for:

- a. John Amos Comenius Blue Plaque

Strategic implications

22. Financial implications – Funding for blue plaques are fully funded by the applicant.
23. Resource implications – As has been previously stated, resourcing for the blue plaque scheme is currently insufficient and this and the process is being reviewed by the Deputy Town Clerk, City Surveyors and the Culture Team. An update on resource and programme will be brought to the January 2026 committee.
24. Legal implications – No legal implications have been identified.
25. Risk implications – No risk implications have been identified.
26. Health & Safety implications – The CAI has Health and Safety representation on the panel, and no health and safety implications were raised.
27. Equalities implications – The Francis Barber Plaque will be the first City of London blue plaque to commemorate a BAME individual. The CAI noted improvements that could be made to the blue plaque programme to widen representation and the importance that the new blue plaque scheme (to be presented to the committee in January) seeks to address the current diversity imbalance. The City Arts Initiative has an access and inclusion officer present on the panel, and the panel reviews all applications in terms of accessibility and inclusivity.
28. Climate implications – No climate implications have been identified.
29. Security implications – No security implications have been identified.

Conclusion

20. This report summarises the City Arts Initiative panel review of the 3 blue plaque applications. It presents recommendations in relation to the public art applications considered on 6 November 2025.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Francis Barber Supporting Information
- Appendix 2 – Francis Barber Plaque Mock Up
- Appendix 3 – George Sandeman Background Research
- Appendix 4 – George Sandeman Plaque Mock Up

Appendix 5 – Comenius in London Supporting Information
Appendix 6 – Comenius Plaque Mock Up

Joanna Parker

Principal Planning Officer, Environment

E: joanna.parker@cityoflondon.gov.uk