

<b>Committee(s):</b> Culture, Heritage and Libraries Committee – For decision	<b>Dated:</b> 19/01/2026
<b>Subject:</b> CoLC Blue Plaques Scheme Redesign	<b>Public report – For decision</b>
<b>Which outcomes in the City Corporation’s Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivers Corporate Plan 2024-29 Outcomes</li> </ul>	Diverse Engaged Communities, Vibrant Thriving Destination, Flourishing Public Spaces
<b>Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?</b>	No
<b>If so, how much?</b>	n/a
<b>What is the source of Funding?</b>	n/a
<b>Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain’s Department?</b>	n/a
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Regeneration & Development, City Surveyor’s (CS.004/26)	Chris Bonner
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### Summary

This report outlines a recommended approach to restructure and relaunch the City of London Blue Plaques scheme, a prestigious scheme designed to commemorate notable historic people, buildings, events and institutions within the Square Mile.

The proposal introduces an enhanced governance structure via a new, voluntary, dedicated panel, enhanced equity, equality, diversity and inclusion measures including a proposal for annual themes, efficient and clear operational processes, and a sustainable funding model combining self-funding and internal funding. Additionally, robust guidelines are currently being developed and will be provided to applicants upfront, ensuring transparency and that it is clear that the burden for producing a full and comprehensive application lies with the applicant not officers thereby reducing administrative burden on officers. These updates are essential to modernise the scheme’s management, encourage inclusion, and secure financial stability. The expected outcomes are clearer decision-making processes, faster applications, and more diverse commemorations, to better utilise this important scheme (currently on hold) for the benefit of recognising key heritage elements of the City’s past for future generations.

Members are invited to approve the proposal and endorse the establishment of a dedicated Blue Plaques Panel, along with its associated Terms of Reference.

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- 1) **Approve** the proposal (Option 2) to restructure the City’s Blue Plaques scheme.

- 2) **Approve** the transfer of responsibility from City Arts Initiative (CAI) to a new Blue Plaques Panel to make recommendations to this Committee on the determination of new applications and guidance on strategic direction.
- 3) **Approve** the Terms of Reference for the Blue Plaques Panel.
- 4) **Note** the benchmarking analysis in Appendix 1.

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. The original (non-City Corporation) blue plaque scheme was launched by the Royal Society of Arts in 1867 for plaques within London. The Society placed only one plaque in the City of London, for Samuel Johnson in 1876. In 1879, the City of London Corporation took over the responsibility of erecting plaques within its boundaries, a demarcation that continues today. English Heritage manages its own scheme for Greater London, excluding the Square Mile.
2. In 2020, the City of London Blue Plaques scheme was transferred to the Heritage Estate Section (HES), within City Surveyor's, ending internal funding and resourcing, and leaving 15 applications to determine. Applications for new blue plaques were paused in 2023 whilst the backlog of applications was cleared.
3. Applications are administered by the HES (a team of two officers who also manage an extensive heritage portfolio of over 800 assets) and reviewed by the CAI panel with the panel's recommendations ratified by the Culture, Heritage and Libraries (CHL) Committee. Recent years have also seen a need for clearer policy, particularly regarding contested heritage.
4. The scheme requires applicants to cover costs, obtain consents, and manage delivery, with support and guidance from the HES. Fixed costs include £2,000 for plaque manufacturing and internal admin, and additional variable costs for installation and consents.
5. Historically, an average of five applications were received annually and three successfully installed. The total process typically took over five years to complete. Since 2021, on average, two plaques have been installed annually.

### **Current Position**

6. Around 140 blue plaques are installed within the Square Mile, the highest density in London. The full list and map are available on the City of London Blue Plaques webpage. 59% celebrate buildings, 23% celebrate people, 17% celebrate institutions and 1% for other. Three plaques commemorate women, and none specifically celebrates Global Majority or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender plus (LGBT+) groups. An analysis of the current scheme and benchmarking against other comparable schemes is provided in **Appendix 1**.
7. In September 2025, CHL Members received a verbal update stating that, despite resourcing challenges, the blue plaque backlog was being resolved, and that a

more inclusive and transparent scheme would be relaunched in 2026. Following a dedicated push, the backlog has been cleared, and over the next year HES will help five applicants to deliver and install blue plaques for Francis Barber, Francis Quarles, Sandeman & Co, Framework Knitters' Hall, and Feltmakers' Hall.

8. Additionally, HES has led a cross-departmental strategic programme with the Head of Profession for Culture, and specifically the Culture Team, The London Archives and the CAI Chair and Deputy Chair, to create this enhanced proposal, and with support from Comptroller and City Solicitor's Department, Planning, Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI) and Digital, Information and Technology Services teams.

## **Options**

### **9. Option 1 – Retain the scheme in its present form**

Benefits: No benefits have been identified.

Risks: Limited selection criteria and inclusivity; resource intensive processes, including for data collection that extend timescales and backlogs.

### **10. Option 2 – Approve the proposal to introduce a new, refreshed scheme (Recommended)**

Implement governance proposals, inclusion measures, and revised operational and funding models.

Benefits: Aligns with corporate goals, improves data collection and application assessment, increases accessibility, and reduces timescales.

Risk: Additional staff resources to implement the programme and to support a potentially higher volume of approved applications. Potential risk of backlogs if the volume of approved applications proves to be too high.

### **11. Option 3 – Cease the scheme entirely (not recommended)**

Benefits: Saves resources and funding, removes administrative burden and eliminates governance complexity.

Risks: Reputational damage, reduced cultural engagement, and failure to meet equality, cultural and corporate objectives.

## **Proposal – Option 2**

12. Option 2 represents a forward-looking approach to enhance the scheme by improving diversity, representation, transparency and sustainable growth as well as by strengthening governance and decision-making structures and streamlining operational processes and digital capabilities.
13. Through innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity, the proposal will keep the City's commemorative programme relevant and meaningful for future generations.
14. Public applications are vital to the scheme's success and so the new scheme makes explicit provision to ensure applications are open to everyone, including private individuals and organisations.

15. Applications will be accepted annually during a designated two-month window. All submissions received within this period will be reviewed together *en bloc* following the published deadline. Any applications received after the cut-off will be considered in the next annual assessment cycle.
16. Blue plaques' delivery will be funded by the applicants. In addition to self-funding, a yearly £10,000 has been secured from the City Surveyor's Local Risk budget (City Fund) to support the installation of at least one blue plaque annually that is unable to self-fund as well as ongoing maintenance and to cover cleaning costs in case of graffiti or similar issues. This initiative is designed to recognise outstanding applications that demonstrate exceptional merit but are unable to self-fund their own endeavours. Savings may be used for general plaque maintenance, subject to funding availability and on a case-by-case basis.
17. In addition to this dedicated funding pot, corporate sponsorship opportunities will be explored to further supplement the £10,000 pot to support other outstanding applications unable to self-fund to enhance the programme further, promote underrepresented subjects and ensure the scheme's long-term sustainability, subject to officers' resources. This commitment reflects our ongoing dedication to celebrating excellence and diverse and engaged communities, and preserving heritage within the City.
18. Total costs depend on circumstances. Fixed fees include £500 for a newly introduced and mandatory application fee to support administration costs and further enhance the aforementioned pot as well as £1,500 for manufacturing the ceramic plaque. The application fee for CoL-funded application(s) applications will be reimbursed. Additional costs, such as statutory consents and installation, vary by location and installation method. **Appendix 3** includes a full breakdown, to be made available on the blue plaques webpage.
19. The CHL Committee will remain the decision-making body, responsible for approving recommendations submitted by a newly established voluntary panel, under City Surveyor's, which replaces the CAI panel for Blue Plaques applications.
20. CAI has provided valuable support in managing blue plaque referrals to date. However, it was not created for this purpose, and its core expertise lies in public art rather than heritage. Absorbing the proposal would require additional resources, reducing capacity to support and improve public art services.
21. Benchmarking reveals a dedicated, officer-led panel with relevant expertise is best practice and results in a more efficient, agile and transparent approach to determining applications and setting the scheme's strategic direction.
22. Mainly officer-led, the panel allows both internal and external membership with relevant expertise. **Appendix 2** outlines suggested Terms of Reference, including membership, the scheme's updated selection criteria, and newly proposed guidelines for applications with contested heritage. If the proposal for the new blue plaque panel is approved, then the functions around this will be removed from the CAI's 2026/27 Terms of Reference.

23. Applications must meet the new eligibility criteria: a clear and direct association with the Square Mile, substantial historical significance, and a positive impact.
24. While all subjects are encouraged and assessed, it is proposed that new annual themes are introduced to encourage and promote applications that celebrate underrepresented groups, such as women, individuals belonging to Global Majority groups, LGBTQ+ communities, etc. This annual focus will not disadvantage other applications, but it could be used to help select outstanding applications unable to self-fund if multiple bids are received. It is proposed that the panel will set each year's theme/campaign based on overall balance and existing available data.
25. The panel will provide an annual update to the EEDI Sub-Committee on the annual applications received, highlighting the scheme's progress in diversification, identifying areas for improvement for the following year, and reviewing best practices and opportunities support.
26. The applications' assessment will be determined by the panel, taking into account the eligibility and selection criteria. Applications with an inappropriate level of detail will not be validated and returned to the applicant. The panel will consider all validated applications and the panel's recommendations will then come to this Committee for final approval. The reasons for refusing an application will be sent to the applicant.
27. The new guidance on contested heritage, prepared for this proposal, outlines the panel's approach to applications with associated contested heritage, including noting the identification, and assessing its risks and factual, neutral plaque inscriptions.
28. HES will continue to administer the scheme, with enhanced cross-departmental support as outlined in **Appendix 3**.
29. Applicants must provide appropriately detailed applications and continue to be responsible for obtaining all necessary consents and arranging for plaque delivery and installation according to new guidelines – to be made available on the blue plaques webpage, new Terms and Conditions Letters, and supported by the HES.
30. The New Terms and Conditions letters, outlined in **Appendix 5**, lay out the legal obligations of the City, applicants, and building owners. The letters replace the existing Licence Agreement to simplify procedures, remove negotiation costs, and accelerate agreements, in a more collaborative, positive and beneficial process.
31. Currently, approval and installation can take more than five years. The new proposal reduces this timescale, by completing internal approvals within one year and aiming to complete installations within two years after Committee approval, depending on site conditions.
32. A new online application form in **Appendix 4** will replace the existing PDF-only version, improving accessibility and collecting more information up front. This will streamline and facilitate assessments and reporting. For inclusivity, applicants who encounter difficulties, may submit in another format if required.

33. The webpage will feature the online form and offer expanded, accessible and more transparent content on commemorations, the scheme, and its new guidelines. It will also note the dates for the application opening window.
34. After approval of the proposal, the panel will be created, timescales confirmed and the scheme will reopen in 2026, expected to coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first plaque in the Square Mile and the unveiling of the blue plaque for Francis Barber.
35. Progress will be tracked through annual reporting on diversity metrics, application timelines, feedback received, and officers' resources data.
36. Improving diversity will align with corporate objectives as well as with objectives of the forthcoming Cultural Strategy to present the City's history through many voices, giving the City Corporation an opportunity to foster a more inclusive and fair cultural future.

## **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

Strategic implications – If Option 2 is adopted: the plaques scheme will be well-managed, with clear frameworks and direction to achieve corporate goals of Diverse Engaged Communities, Vibrant Thriving Destination and Flourishing Public Spaces.

Financial implications – Funding for blue plaques will be, for the most part, fully funded by the applicants. However, in addition to the self-funded applications, a £10,000 Local Risk budget has been secured from City Surveyor's (City Fund) budgets to support the costs associated with the manufacture and installation of at least one blue plaque based on criteria set out in the guidelines to improve the diversity of subjects celebrated for applicants unable to self-fund, and to support future maintenance. Sponsorship will also be explored to support the costs of further applications for underrepresented subjects.

Resource implications – Risk of increased workload and insufficient officer resources. Mitigation includes streamlining processes and creating new and clear guidance for applicants. If officer resources prove to be too limited to meet excessive demand for new plaques, mitigation could include capping the number of approvals in the following cycle but if this were deemed necessary, the decision would be brought back to this Committee for consideration.

Legal implications – All installations must comply with all necessary consents required by statute or by law, and with the New Terms and Conditions letters.

Risk implications – The panel's Terms of Reference set out that anything which could pose a reputational risk is to be referred to the CHL committee. Despite streamlined processes, there is a risk of a backlog developing if a substantial volume of approved applications places excessive demand on officers' resources, potentially requiring additional resources or a pause in the scheme's operation. Mitigation includes reviewing the process at the end of year 1 and 2 and making any adjustments as needed. While officers are supportive of an application fee, it is acknowledged that

such a fee could limit accessibility for individuals who may be unable to afford it. Mitigation includes reviewing the process at end of year 1 and making any adjustments as needed.

Equalities implications – The proposal is expected to positively impact individuals protected under equality legislation. The Public Sector Equality Duty applies when the City Corporation is exercising a public function; due regard has been given to eliminating discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity, and fostering good relations, including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding. Positive impacts include improved representation of underrepresented groups, greater accessibility for all and considers practical measures such as positioning plaques at an inclusive height.

Climate implications – None.

Security implications – There is a small risk of intentional damage to plaques by those who might disagree with a commemoration; this will be mitigated through secure fixings and, whenever possible, proactive community engagement to build understanding and support.

## **Recommendation**

To approve Option 2.

## **Conclusion**

This report summarises the recommendation made for Members of CHL to approve the Blue Plaques Scheme proposal (option 2) and approve the new Blue Plaques Panel and its Terms of Reference. Approving Option 2 proposal will be essential to improve the scheme and increase public trust.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – CoL Blue Plaques – Assessment, Database and Benchmarking
- Appendix 2 – CoL Blue Plaques Panel Terms of Reference
- Appendix 3 – Roles and Responsibilities and Cost Breakdown
- Appendix 4 – CoL Blue Plaques Proposed Online Form
- Appendix 5 – Proposed Terms and Conditions Letters

## **Background Papers**

CAI terms of reference 2024/25

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